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FOR AND AGAINST

OR

QUEEN MARGARET'S BADGE

VOL I

FOR AND AGAINST

OR

QUEEN MARGARET'S BADGE

A DOMESTIC CHRONICLE OF THE FIFTEENTH
CENTURY

BY

FRANCES M. WILBRAHAM

'Go furth, Libelle, and meekely shew thy face.'



IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL I

LONDON

JOHN W. PARKER AND SON WEST STRAND

1858

[The Author reserves the right of Translation.]

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THIS RECORD
OF ONCE TROUBLOUS TIMES IN OUR NOW PEACEFUL LAND
IS INSCRIBED
TO
ANASTASIA AND KATHARINE
AS AN INCENTIVE TO THANKFULNESS TOWARDS HIM
WHO HATH CAST THEIR LOT
IN PEACEABLE HABITATIONS AND
QUIET RESTING-PLACES.

P R E F A C E.

SHOULD the Reader of this Book be desirous to know whence the facts which form the staple of it are drawn, the writer would refer such an inquirer to the following works :—

The Paston Papers, edited by FENN.

The *Chronicles*, of HOLINSHED, HALL, STOWE,
POLYDORE VERGIL, BARANTE, &c.

ORMEROD'S and LYSON'S *Histories of Cheshire*.

PETTIGREW'S *Medical Superstitions*.

BRANDE'S *Popular Antiquities*.

State Trials, especially that of William Thorp.

Discoverie of Witches, by POTTS.

Lecture on the Battle of Bloreheath, by W. BEA-
MONT, Esq.

FOSBROKE'S *Dictionary of Antiquities*.

The works of LYDGATE, CHAUCER, DRAYTON, &c.

CONTENTS OF VOL. I.

PART I.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. OF THE RETURN HOME	I
II. OF THE FIRST EVENING	20
III. OF THE CHESHIRE PROPHET ROBERT NIXON	48
IV. OF THE SISTERS	72
V. OF THE DECISION	92
VI. OF LIGHT AND DARKNESS	118
VII. OF THE LORD OF AUDELEY AND HIS GUESTS	138
VIII. OF THE JOURNEY TO LICHFIELD	168
IX. OF THE JOUST	200
X. OF THE FIRST BATTLE	242

PART II.

I. OF THE COURT AND THE KINGMAKER	297
II. OF THE TWINS	341

PART I.

FOR AND AGAINST.

CHAPTER I.

OF THE RETURN HOME.

Follow yon majestic train
Down the slopes of old renown ;
Knightly forms without disdain,
Sainted heads without a frown ;
Emperors of thought and hand
Congregate, a glorious show,
Met from every age and land,
In the plains of Long-ago.
On that deep retiring shore
Frequent pearls of beauty lie,
Where the passion waves of yore
Fiercely beat, and mounted high.

The Long-ago. BY R. M. MILNES.

TOWARDS the close of a bleak January day, in the year of grace 1455, a small party of horsemen rode slowly across the brow of a high hill, one of the range which divides Staffordshire from Cheshire. They were but three in number, and two of them, a grey-haired man-at-arms and a stripling in a tight

fitting suit with no ornament save a 'greyhound passant' embroidered front and back, on his dark dress, lingered some paces behind, as if afraid of breaking in upon the meditations of their master. He was a gentleman of strong and well-knit frame, of middle height and erect bearing, and, according to the custom of those dangerous days, he rode armed with sword and with the small dagger then in use. A helmet, swelling out angularly in front, with oblong eye-holes and a perforation for breathing, protected his head. It was fastened by rings, before and behind, to the breast and back-plates. He wore loose boots with slips of steel over them, and hose or pantaloons terminating in richly-worked leather kneecaps. His shoulder-plates were ornamented to match, and stood out so as something to resemble the wings of a bird. He rode, according to the knightly fashion of the day, with long stirrups and toes pointed downward. Thus he wended his way, following a narrow track that wound through tufts of brown heather and stunted bilberry bushes, or rather, permitting his bay charger to roam at will amongst them, while his eyes and thoughts wandered to the landscape below.

Much of the plain of Cheshire might be seen from that eminence ; not parcelled out into fields as now, nor dotted with numberless dwellings, but consisting mostly of unenclosed pasture-ground running up into the great forest of Macclesfield. This expanse of woodland wore a somewhat gloomy aspect, its sameness being only broken by a few narrow bridlepaths, and scarcely enlivened by occasional pools and swampy tracts on which the declining sunbeams glimmered faintly. Here and there a thin column of smoke marked the cabin of some charcoal burner, or the haunt of some less honest denizen of the forest. A larger body of smoke on the horizon marked the site of Macclesfield, and the page's quick eye could distinguish its rampart and the tower (long since destroyed) of St. Michael's noble church. The hills of Derbyshire shut in the view. Almost in front of our travellers, as they faced the west, stood out the rock and castle of Beeston, bristling with defences ; and far, far away, towards the sea, loomed the faint outline of Halton Castle, once the loved resort of Duke John of Gaunt. The Mersey, like a silver thread, glistened beyond it ; but it was almost hidden by knolls and uplands, the

hunting-grounds where 'time-honoured Lancaster' had delighted in 'chasing the wild deer.'

Sounds of rural labour and rural mirth rose up through the crisp frosty air, and amongst them the not unmusical cry of village maidens calling the cattle home.

'I marvel, Gralam, that our master tarries thus,' said the youth to his companion. 'Methinks the sight of yonder clump of elm-trees at our feet should make his heart spring, as it doth mine. I long to clear the distance at one bound, and alight at my father's door,' and, playfully suiting the action to the word, he urged his tired animal to the edge of the platform, and obliged him to execute some unwilling caracoles on the heather. 'That voice might be our Gillian's calling the kine,' he exclaimed, growing more excited as he hearkened to the familiar sounds, and peered down into a nook under the hill-side, where leafless trees scarcely concealed a gable-ended homestead. 'Why loiters our master here, as a knight might do who had disgraced his spurs and feared to face his kindred and his ladye love?'

'Peace, malapert,' growled the old serving

man ; ‘ couple not such words as ‘ disgrace ’ or ‘ fear ’ with the honoured name of Holforde. Thinkest thou, Hamo, that shallow wit of thine can fathom a hundredth part of the cogitations that trouble our master’s brain ? Learn to rule thy saucy tongue, or it will bring thy neck into jeopardy.’

So said Gralam, though inwardly disturbed at the knight’s unwonted tardiness. True as he was to his master, and he had proved that truth on more than one battle-field, his was rather the surly faithfulness of a mastiff than the intelligent service of a thinking being ; and he could as little guess as Hamo himself at the causes of their master’s abstraction. Memories of the past, or misgivings for the future, had no place in his mind ; and still less knew or recked he of that deep instinct of our nature that makes us pause and tremble on the brink of a great happiness almost as much as on that of a great sorrow.

‘ Nay, Gralam, I meant no scorn,’ the lad was beginning to reply, when a sign from the knight broke off their discourse. He might have guessed its purport, for he said,—

‘ Gralam, my wound hath reopened, and maketh a laggart of me this afternoon. I may

not choose but ride slowly down the steep, but thou, good fellow, pass onward to the Manor of Newbolde; bear my filial greetings to its honoured master, and say I will be with him anon. Take Hamo with thee, and dismiss him at his mother's door.'

The grey-haired servant hesitated for once to obey his master. 'Pardon my freedom, Sir Piers,' he said; 'but I would fain stay near you. You look faint and bloodless, and it lacketh yet half a league of your journey's end. Should any outlaws or evildoers lurk in these brakes—as who can say there may not?—you are not yourself to cope with them.'

Sir Piers laughed outright. 'Thy fears, good Gralam, outrun thy judgment. We are not now on the unfriendly launds of Guienne, or amid the wild Irish Kernes, whom thy Saxon temper did so abhor. We are in merry Cheshire, man, the Vale Royal of England, among brave hearts and true, that will throb with joy when they hear the footfall of our steeds. Haste forward, then, or peradventure I may win the race.'

Gralam and Hamo soon disappeared, and Sir Piers followed as fast as the hurt in his left side would permit. Some way down the steep

he paused to drink at a little fountain called Woodcocks' Well, remarkable then, as now, for its coolness and clearness. One draught of its ice-cold water, like the honey Jonathan found in the wood of Beth-aven, 'enlightened the warrior's eyes' and dispelled the mist which pain had gathered over them. He slung his helmet across one arm, and after indulging his charger with a draught, was leading him back to the beaten track, when he caught sight of a mounted party coming rapidly up the slope. Their glad acclamations left no doubt of their being friends. A tall, slender stripling of fourteen, with delicately chiselled features and golden locks, was the first to gallop up to him. Besides the reins of his own small steed, he held those of a yet smaller palfrey, which, however, equalled his in speed. The rider was a fair-haired maiden, his twin sister; the image of himself in features and colouring, but of small and fairy-like proportions.

'Welcome, welcome, dear cousin,' cried Maurice Done, dismounting and throwing his arms round Sir Piers's neck; 'we heard even now of thy approach from grim old Gralam, and hasted to meet thee.'

'Welcome, cousin,' softly echoed the maiden,

her beaming eyes and dimpling smiles expressing more than the mere words.

‘Nay, not ‘cousin,’ dear Lettice. I claim the style and title of brother,’ replied Sir Piers, kissing her forehead.

‘Brother Piers, Cecily will be glad now,’ she answered; and the childish words brought a rush of happy homelike thoughts to the wayfarer’s heart, and of eloquent blood to his face, ‘sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought’ and suffering. The group now thickened round him. It consisted of several foresters and retainers of the Dones, and of sundry neighbours, small landowners or substantial yeomen, who were invited from time to time to share with them the pastime of hunting. Within this ring of faces, some expressing honest pleasure, some keen curiosity, a few stupid indifference, the three cousins stood still for awhile, Piers greeting and being greeted by many old acquaintance. Then they rode forward with him to the village-green, where young Maurice, turning round and doffing his velvet bonnet with an easy grace which surprised his cousin, courteously dismissed them.

‘Kind neighbours all,’ he said, ‘fain would we bid you enter within our doors, and pledge

this brave knight in the good Cheshire ale, whose like he hath not tasted abroad, but ye all know my grandfather is not well, and his age and weakness crave repose. Deem us not churlish, then, if we delay no further leading our guest to his chamber. A fair good night to all.'

They quickened their pace as they crossed the smooth-shaven green, a broad open space skirted on two sides by straggling cottages and farmsteads. They were all low buildings of lath and plaster, with neither chimneys nor glazed windows, but mere openings to admit air and light, and holes (louvres, as they were called) for the smoke to escape through. But, though rude in construction and devoid of neatness and finish, there was no squalidness about them. They had indeed lost the air of comfort they had possessed some years before, for the land was only beginning to recover from a grievous scarcity, and the long wars with France had almost beggared its owners. Yet were there tokens of plenty left: sleek, well-fed cattle were waiting for admittance to their sheds; little children, in warm close-fitting coats of rough cloth and home-made fur caps, were playing merrily about the doors. There

were cultivated bits of ground roughly fenced in from the geese or donkeys which frequented the common, and planted with garden herbs and such vegetables as were then in use. Beehives of a conical shape, neatly made of unpeeled willow-wands, were placed against the south sides of the cottages. Within many of the dwellings savoury messes were being prepared for the peasant father or husband on his return from the day's toil. Over the fire of mixed coal and wood was an iron trivet, and on that a large kettle containing the family supper of broth, then a frequent meal. The careful housewives stirred it or drew out the solid morsels of meat it contained with a large three-pronged fork, not unlike the flesh-hook mentioned in Scripture. Their boys meanwhile were scattered over the green, playing at quoits, football, or the newly introduced and popular game of prison-bars. These, together with the practice of the bow—'Goddes instrumente,' as an old writer quaintly calls it—were the chief pastimes of the British youth at that day. It was well for them that such manly and invigorating sports were encouraged, for the Romish calendar forced upon them the observance of many holidays; and in an era

when printing was unknown, and written lore inaccessible, there was an utter dearth of occupation for the mind of the peasant.

There was a pause as Sir Piers and his companions rode by; and women and little children hastened to their doors to catch a glimpse of the knight who had fought a good fight on the bloody field of Chastillon. They followed him with their eyes to the further end of the green, where stood the village church. It caused no surprise that he dismounted here, and, giving the reins to Maurice, entered the church alone. The good custom of more chivalrous days, that men who had been preserved through some pressing danger, or travellers returning home, should pay their vows in God's house before re-entering their own, was not yet abandoned. With the thoughtless or profane it might have become a matter of form, or worse, but it was not so with Piers Holforde. His mind was that of a Christian knight, earnest and pure, full of loyalty to God and man; not free, indeed, from error, but grand in its stern hatred of wrong, and gentle even to tenderness in its care for the weak. Such characters we meet with now and then, in the dark history of the

Middle Ages ; men who held their knighthood as a trust from God, and thought it no shame to own this, and look up to Him for strength to keep it unsullied.

The knight's orisons were fervent, but short ; and in a few minutes he rose from his kneeling-place in the dark and silent chancel. Only a rich sunset glow from the west window opposite showed its outline, while the roof with its forest of oak-beams and rafters was lost in darkness. A large crucifix stood upon the rood-loft, and, as usual, the images of St. John and of the blessed Virgin were placed on either side of it. They were roughly carved and coarsely painted, but the twilight dimness gave them something of beauty and solemnity which they lacked by daylight. A few votive offerings of trifling value hung beneath them ; and among these Sir Piers placed a small chain of graven gold, to which was attached a dove cut out of opal, its head and wings tipped with gold. Then crossing himself, he was about to depart, when a hand was laid on his arm. A woman, no longer young, with wrinkled but kindly and eager face, put back her hood, and accosted him familiarly :—

‘Master Piers, is it thou? Now God be praised

and the holy St. Werburgh, whom we have not ceased to weary with our prayers! I never thought, good faith, I never did, nor Mistress Cecily neither, to see thy face again! But know they of thy coming at the Manor? It is scarcely two hours since we left it, Mistress Cecily and I, to visit Gammer Bettiley's sick grandchild, the babe whose mother died at Lammas, and then there was no stir of thy coming.'

'And where is Mistress Cecily? good Parnel,' Sir Piers asked in a low voice. Parnel replied by plucking his sleeve and drawing him to a spot in the nave whence the whole of the south aisle could be seen. It extended as far as the end of the chancel, so as to form a second gable in a line with it.

This was the 'Done Chantry,' built and endowed in the previous century by a 'gentle and doughty esquire' of that name, who, together with his kinsman, the Holforde of the day, died for the cause of King Richard II. Both estates were seized upon by the crown; but the son of John Done was happy in having a powerful friend at court, who pleaded his cause so well with Henry of Bolingbroke, that the forfeited lands were restored. A rich oak

screen fenced off the chantry from the nave, and a raised altar-tomb, supporting the effigy of a Crusader, screened it in part from the chancel. It had its own services and peculiar priest attached to it, its piscina and altar, before which now knelt a lady wrapped in cloak and hood. Her head was turned away and meekly bent down, and her figure but imperfectly seen in the light of the small silver lamp overhead. Sir Piers gazed earnestly for awhile, deaf to the voice of Parnel, who urged him in a loud whisper to draw nearer; then shaking her gently off, he stole away through the south porch.

But Parnel was not to be shaken off. 'Yon chain of gold,' she said, following him; 'it is precious, and of rare workmanship, wilt thou leave it there, Master Piers?'

'Assuredly, good foster-mother,' he answered; 'therefor I brought it from Hierusalem, where it was fashioned by a cunning graver, and afterwards blest on the most Holy Sepulchre.'

The old woman shook her head.

'I fear me its sanctity will not avail for its safety,' she said. 'These are evil days, Master Piers, grievously worsened since you left

us five years ago; honest men grow scarcer and scarcer, and ——'

'But what of the chain?' asked Sir Piers, impatiently; 'you speak in riddles, and time presses.'

'Riddles are safest sometimes,' she answered, peering round and dropping her voice; 'and Sir Roger,¹ our vicar, hath long ears.'

'I love not these dark speeches,' said the Knight, mounting his horse. 'Speak out, good Parnel, or not at all.'

'Then, if I must speak out,' she said, 'the gaud is not safe, even at yon holy shrine; no precious thing is safe from Sir Roger's lust of gain; he wringeth gold from the rich, silver from the yeoman, nay, hard-earned brass, from the newly-freed villein. Some men say he dealeth in alchemy; others, that mere love of gold sways him; others, that he is a plotter in the pay of some great court lord. This only I know, that——'

'Peace!' said the Knight; 'this is rash talk, and unprofitable; return to thy lady, bear her my reverent homage, and say I trust I shall meet her anon in her grandfather's presence;

* The title of 'Sir' was always appended to the name of parish priests.

and, for the chain, vex not thyself, good mother, its safety shall be cared for.'

'There is more sense than appears at first sight in Parnel's prating,' remarked young Maurice, as they rode on; 'this Sir Roger is a greedy caitiff, and an evil liver. I verily believe, where gold or silver becks him to come on, bell, book, and candle shall not hold him back. He hath moreover some special grudge against my grandfather, who detected him some time back oppressing in most cruel-wise a widow and her friendless babes. I forget the details of this scandalous matter, but well remember how all the parish cried shame upon Sir Roger. There be too many like him hereabouts, and we should fare ill but for good Sir Armine, our chantry priest. Thou rememberest him, Piers?'

'I remember him well, for I loved him well,' replied the Knight; 'and when I was a stripling at Oxford, scarce older than thou art, Maurice, and as light-hearted, I often sought his company rather than that of my boyish compeers. He was a man poor in this world's gear, but rich in better gifts, and withal with such a strange persuasiveness about him, that Wisdom lost her crabbedness when uttered by his lips.'

As they neared the Manor, Piers relapsed into silence, scarcely hearing the disjointed talk of his young companions respecting their day's sport, the 'huske' of hares they had 'unformed' on the Little Moss, and pursued to Harisay Head, or the 'craft' of the young harriers they had hunted with for the first time that morning. This discourse brought them to the front of the house—a substantial building, half-peaceful, half-warlike in its appearance, built of grey stone from the neighbouring hill.

It was surrounded by a wide moat, and approached by a drawbridge, now lowered to admit travellers. Its outer wall was only pierced with a few narrow loopholes; a usual precaution in those unsettled days, when country houses were not safe from siege and violence. Several persons were looking through these loopholes, and many more were gathered outside the house, round a high green mound composed of earth formerly dug out of the moat. Men half-armed, or in leather jerkins, were cleaning their horses or leading them to rough sheds built near the outside brink of the moat, for the accommodation of guests and their followers.

‘Whom have we here, Nicholas?’ asked Maurice, remarking the unusual stir and excitement.

‘So please you, Master Maurice,’ answered the house-steward, ‘the worshipful Knight Sir Thomas Dutton of Dutton, hath suddenly arrived, with his son and brother, and is now conferring with your grandfather, Sir Ranulph.’

‘To the tapestried chamber, then,’ said Maurice to his cousin; ‘my grandfather is doubtless awaiting thee there; lead on, Nicholas.’

Meanwhile, Mistress Lettice, blythe as a bird, sprang up a winding, or ‘cockle’ stair, to her apartment at the top of the house. There she waited with no little impatience the return of her elder sister. It was not long delayed, and Cecily, mute and trembling, sat down and listened to the details of Piers’s arrival; while Parnel sought her storeroom and kitchen, to overlook the preparations for supper for such illustrious guests.

‘Good store of hypocras will be needed,’ she said, ‘to drive out the cold, this frosty night. No hand but mine shall mix it, for truly old Nicholas waxeth dim of sight, and his cunning hath failed him of late;

then, Joane must be looked to ; she is but an indifferent pasterer, and maketh woeful waste of that new and rare commodity whereof the Lady Delves sent us a sample—the sugar from Sicily. It must be used but sparingly—ay, sparingly—in the orange fryttors Sir Piers did when a boy affect. I must look to these things ; for marry, Mistress Cecily is as one in a dream to-night, and sweet Mistress Letitia, bless her heart, is a very babe in such matters!

CHAPTER II.

OF THE FIRST EVENING.

A hundred thousand welcomes !—SHAKESPEARE.

SUPPER had been ended more than an hour in the hall of Newbolde Manor, and most of the retainers of Done and Dutton had, for want of other occupation, betaken themselves to their pallets of straw. It was a calm snowy night, not a breath stirring, and the curfew toll came muffled through the loaded air. The hall, which two hours before had worn a sombre aspect, looked singularly picturesque in the glow of the winter fire. Only the blue glimmer of departing day came through three narrow stone-shafted windows that looked into an inner quadrangle, but the great pine-logs on the hearth crackled merrily, and the lumps of cannel coal amongst them vied with each other which should throw out most brightness. It was all needed to relieve the quiet uniform grey of the apartment, with its vaulted stone-roof supported by low pillars, its massive

dining-table, and immovable benches. At the raised end, within and around the wide chimney, several high-backed oaken chairs had been placed, and were occupied by Sir Ranulph's guests. He himself had quitted them an hour before to take some needful rest, but now returned leaning on the arm of Sir Piers Holforde and on that of his eldest granddaughter. They led him to his own crimson-cushioned chair to the right of the hearth. It was elaborately carved in oak, the back composed of two lions gardant supporting a shield with two bars, and over all, on an oaken bend, three silver arrows. Beneath, in strong relief, the sentence 'Omnia mei dona Dei' was cut out. It was the family motto, and had been for many years before Sir Ranulph's birth; but no words could have better expressed the dominant feeling of his mind. He had practised from his youth in the Court of Common Pleas, a court of which Hale, our great legal historian, says, that it abounded in learned and excellent men during the reign of Henry VI. He had attained considerable eminence in his profession; more by unflinching uprightness and perseverance than by brilliant talent. Early in life he had married, and been left a widower with an only

son, Richard, whom he would fain have trained up to his own profession. But the youth was bent on following that of arms, and accordingly spent his best years abroad, fighting under the banner of our ally Philip of Burgundy, mis-called the Good, and afterwards, in the French wars, by the side of James Tucket, Lord of Audeley. At the court of Duke Philip, Richard Done fell in love with and wedded a beautiful Burgundian maiden. Happily she was as virtuous as fair ; and when, seven years later, he fell in some insignificant skirmish, she retired from the world, and gave herself up to the care of her three children. Sir Ranulph, then resident in London, offered the widowed Clotilde a home, which she thankfully accepted ; and the father and daughter-in-law dwelt together in unbroken harmony till her death, just two years before our narrative begins. About that time declining health forced Sir Ranulph to retire from public life ; and he gladly returned to his native Cheshire with an income sufficient to enable him to maintain decent hospitalities and take his place among the gentlemen of the county. His orphan grandchildren were his constant companions and main solace ; not the less so that, according to the custom of those

days, much respect and awe mingled with their love, and gave some constraint to the expression of it.

Cecily reverently placed him in his chair, arranged his footstool, and disposed the folds of the black velvet gown which was fastened round his throat with a golden ouch; a few silvery locks fell on the lace collar; there were no very deep lines or wrinkles on the pale bare forehead; and the expression of his full grey eye, though intelligent, was placid, as of one whom the storms of life have touched lightly. Cecily stood by her grandfather a few moments, as if waiting his further bidding, then took her place on a lower seat, a little behind his.

The maiden, unlike her sister, betrayed something of her mother's foreign origin, in the deep hazel of her large eyes and the clear un-English paleness of her complexion. She was dignified and graceful in demeanour, and the dress worn by damsels of her degree at that time beseeemed her well. Under a kirtle of violet silk she wore a vest and partlet, or small ruff of the finest, whitest lawn; a necklace of chrysolites was clasped round her throat. Her youth, happily, exempted her from adopting the heavy horned or steeple-shaped head-dress

then worn by matrons, and her shining hair was merely confined by a net of gold, not many shades lighter than itself, and forming a halo round those pure and delicate features. Their expression was a little graver than usual, partly from agitation at the return of her betrothed, partly from having for the first time exchanged for brighter apparel the mourning weeds worn during the last two years. It was right that those memorials of the dead should now be doffed, and Cecily knew it; but that one evening old and dear remembrances would not be quite shut out. As she glanced at the fair colours and sparkling gems with which she was decked, a thrill of sadness ran through her, a yearning, even to pain, for the mother who had moulded her every feeling and shared her every thought, who had been the counsellor of Piers's boyhood, and ever loved him, and prophesied that he would grow up good and true. But these images were soon put away, to be reviewed at a fitter time; and she met Piers's inquiring look with a smile as bright as even he could desire; that smile grew almost malicious in its mirth as John Dutton, Sir Thomas's younger brother, entered the hall.

The extravagance in dress, as well as in

armour, which twenty years later reached its highest point, was even now rapidly growing ; and a historian of the age tells us that it was not uncommon for young men to carry two-thirds of their capital upon their backs. In this foppishness few exceeded John Dutton. He wore this evening a just'-au-corps of kerseymere, laced in front like a lady's stomacher, slashed at the sleeves to show the lawn shirt underneath, and sewn with seed pearls ; over this was a tunic of changeable, or, as we call it, shot silk, woven in the looms of the East ; white kerseymere pantaloons, and shoes of embroidered leather, turning up more than three inches at the toe, completed his attire. He advanced to the daïs, or raised end of the hall, smoothing away the straight yellow hair which hung down, like a girl's, over his back.

' Fair Mistress Cecily,' he said, playing with the pouncet-box, held daintily between the first finger and thumb of his left hand, ' I recommend me to your graciousness with all manner of reverence and in the most lowly wise as me ought to do ; and much I beseech you, enlighten me, a three months' exile in the Marches of Wales, concerning the latest doings in London and in Queen Margaret's Court.'

‘Alack, fair sir,’ Cecily replied, ‘I can tell you little of that you desire to know, not having visited London for the space of two years. But my brother may, perchance, satisfy you better, he having only returned two days since from his attendance on the distressed King.’

‘Of what attendance speak you, fair cousin?’ asked Sir Piers.

‘Oh, cousin Piers,’ she answered, ‘have we not told you yet that, since the King’s unhappy malady hath possessed him, the sound of music is his greatest refreshment? By the advice of his mediciners, minstrels have been sought for him far and wide through the kingdom. Now it chanced last spring that my Lord of Audeley, in whose household Maurice spent the Easter holiday, spoke to her Majesty the Queen of his aptness for vocal and instrumental music. Queen Margaret, who brooketh no delay, at once sent for Maurice, and led him to the royal presence; and so marvellously was the poor King recreated by the sound of his lute, that Maurice is now frequently summoned from his studies at the new college of Eton, to spend whole weeks in the royal bower of Shene.’

‘And the summons is not unwelcome?’ asked Piers.

‘It is but too welcome,’ answered the maiden, lowering her voice. ‘The Queen is ever devising new pastimes to divert King Henry, and therefore it is an idle life; nothing talked of but hawks and hounds, or the newest fashion of coif or kirtle—or the newest oath,’ she added, sighing, ‘for Maurice doth aver that King Henry is the only man at Court that useth not profane swearing. Pray Heaven, cousin Piers, that fashion do not spread in the country; but Father Armine fears it will, for he says, ‘the cast-off vices of the Court do ever become the vices of the people.’’

‘It is a catching vice, though meseems a dull and pointless one,’ answered Piers; ‘and alas, dear cousin, we dwellers in camps grow so used to it, that we forget the evil thereof.’

The fop meanwhile had joined a merry trio below the daïs, consisting of Maurice, Letitia, and young Piers Dutton, Sir Thomas’s eldest boy. They had cleared a space on the rush-strewn floor (the daïs, by the way, was carpeted with tapestry), and were busy playing with ‘closheys,’ ivory ninepins, much in vogue at the Court. Maurice had brought a set for his

sisters, and was completely absorbed in showing Lettice how to use them ; so, when John Dutton reiterated his question, ‘What news from the Court?’ he answered without looking up—

‘What news, John Dutton? Why, marry, the news thou wilt most care for is that the gallants have a new device of tying their shoes with gold bobbin!’

John looked discomfited and angry, and touched the little dagger that hung to his jewelled girdle. The young ones laughed, and Sir Thomas Dutton half smiled, saying aside to Piers—

‘Serves him right for assuming that apish disguise. He is not altogether the popinjay he looks, and hath even now done good service against the Welsh outlaws.’

But Sir Ranulph, though slow of hearing, had caught the flippant remark, and called Maurice to his side in a voice of grave displeasure,—

‘Answer my guest in another strain than that, young sir, or else go straight to thy chamber to ponder there on the laws of courtesy.’

Queen Margaret’s spoilt favourite coloured high, and his eye flashed, but only for a moment.

‘Forgive me, grandfather ; I have spoken

amiss—forgive, good cousin of Dutton, and, in proof of forgiveness, suffer me to reply more meetly to your question.’

There was a silence ; then bluff Sir Thomas exclaimed, ‘I’faith, John, an thou be so shrewish to a jest, thou dost proclaim thyself the fool in motley thy garb betokens. Shake hands, man, and bid our young cousin proceed.’

‘I believe,’ said Maurice, when this ceremony was over, ‘the theme most rife in men’s discourse is the all but regal power of the Duke of York, my Lord Protector, and of his new Lord Chancellor, the Earl of Salisbury ; the latter being thought better skilled to bestride his mettlesome charger than to rein in the fiery and restive Peers ! The Queen and Duke are at daggers drawing, and there is much division of opinion, some siding with the one, some with the other, even in King Harry’s own Court. The King himself, though greatly amended, hath not yet sufficiently recovered from the malady of his spirit to manifest his royal pleasure in state matters ; we trust, however, he shortly will.’

‘Is the King, then, so far restored?’ asked Sir Thomas Dutton.

‘He is,* and hath been since Christmas-day ; and on St. John’s-day he bade his almoner ride to Canterbury with his offering, and commanded the Secretary to offer at St. Edward’s.’

‘And, brother, hath he yet seen the baby Prince of Wales?’ asked Letitia.

‘He hath, Lettice. On the Monday afternoon the Queen came to him, and brought my Lord Prince with her ; and then he asked what the Prince’s name was, and the Queen told him Edward ; and then he held up his hands and thanked God thereof. And he said he never knew him till that time, nor wist not what was said to him, nor wist where he had been whilst he had been sick, till now ; and he asked who were godfathers, and the Queen told him the Lord Cardinal Kempe and the Duke of Buckingham ; and he was well content. Then she told him Cardinal Kempe was dead, and he said he knew never thereof till that time ; and he said, one of the wisest lords in the land was dead.’

‘What noblemen have been admitted to his presence?’ asked Sir Thomas. ‘Knowest thou,

* The following account is taken almost verbatim from the *Paston Letters*.

cousin, if he have seen any of the councillors of state ?’

‘None, I believe,’ answered Maurice ; ‘only churchmen have I yet seen with him. My Lord Bishop of Winchester* and my Lord Prior of St. John of Hierusalem were with him on the morrow after Twelfth-day ; and he spake to them as well as ever he did in his life ; and when they came out, they wept for joy.’

‘I, too,’ murmured Lettice to her sister, ‘could weep to hear of it.’ But looking up, and seeing the bright drops falling from Cecily’s eyes, she abruptly turned away, and busied herself in setting up the closheys.

‘Blessed be God for this news,’ said Sir Thomas. ‘It will much glad the heart of my noble father-in-law, the Lord Audeley, when he hears it to-morrow. Now we may hope the dissensions that tear this unhappy land to pieces may be composed.’

‘The King,’ continued Maurice, ‘saith he is in charity with all the world, and so he would all the lords were. And now he saith matins and evensong, and heareth his mass devoutly.’

The Knight of Dutton tapped the floor with

* William Waynflete, afterwards Lord Chancellor.

his foot, and muttered impatiently certain words, of which 'shaven monk' and 'pattering aves' were alone distinguishable.

Sir Ranulph sighed, and said, 'It sufficeth, Maurice;' and the boy returned to his nine-pins.

He and young Dutton were the players; while Lettice, on the tiptoe of delight, looked on, suggested, or criticized. 'Ah, me!' she cried, at a critical point in the game, 'the king is all but overthrown; save him, Piers Dutton!'

'Many a true word is spoken in jest,' observed Sir Thomas, sadly. 'Little Lettice's shrill pipe hath but proclaimed what grey-haired men do quake to utter, yet cannot choose but think.'

'Is England, then, so distracted?' asked Piers. 'I have but set foot on my native soil a week, and find all changed, or changing; but as yet have met with none that could interpret these riddles to me. Of you, Sir Thomas, or our honoured host, I have shrunk from seeking an explanation, seeing that our thoughts and loyal affections run in different channels.'

'Pity it should be so,' answered the bluff

Knight; 'yet, Sir Piers, I know thee for an honest man, and there is no subject on which honest men may not freely speak one to another. It is for lack of honesty this land is perishing. Since Henry of Bolingbroke, whose soul the heavens assoil, wrested the sceptre from Richard's feeble hand, and, to my thinking, saved the state by doing so, men's loyalty hath faltered; they dispute of royal pedigrees, and pretend to weigh the rival claims of Lancaster and York, and all the while they be intent on their own gain and greed. Too many, fie upon them, wait to see which party will advantage them most; and those who should be pillars of the land are foremost in this unrighteous paltering.'

'The unhappy Duke of Suffolk,' said Piers.

'Ay, he hath paid for his errors with his head, hewn off with a pirate's rusty sword on Dover sands. Yet he was not the worst amongst them, and for four-and-thirty years had served this country well in the wars of France.'

'True, Dutton,' interposed Sir Ranulph; 'nor was Margaret our Queen to blame for protecting him, her tried and early friend. The Cardinal of Winchester was far the heavier

criminal when, for his own wicked ends, he poisoned her young mind against her uncle of Gloucester. 'Tis a dark and fearful history, that of the good Duke's death ; and the vulgar, which love exaggerated and horrible tales, will never be persuaded that Margaret was guiltless thereof.'

'That unhappy belief hath bred much disloyalty,' said Sir Thomas. 'Without it, the low caitiff Jack Cade had scarcely been permitted to carry his daring outrages so far. He perished miserably, and his frantic crew were soon dispersed ; but the spirit of misrule hath not died with him—it is still abroad, braving the majesty of the law.'

'These outrages have increased of late, I fear,' lisped John Dutton. 'Both in the Marches of Wales and on the borders of Lancashire many acts of violence were reported to me ; cattle and sheep carried off, farmsteads plundered or burnt, by troops of wandering outlaws. Of a truth these reports were too much akin to the old French tales of the Jacquerie to be altogether agreeable. The gryphon of Wales will soon be rampant again an his claws be not cut.'

'Thanks to God, and to the good Lord of

Audeley, and other true-hearted gentlemen, Cheshire and Staffordshire be yet peaceable,' said Sir Ranulph. 'Yet even here the loss of our French domain hath created deep discontent.'

'And where is the man,' cried Sir Thomas, 'whose blood would not boil to think of those fair provinces, yielded one by one, and lost to our realm for ever?'

'In sooth, mine does,' answered Piers, bitterly.

There followed a long, deep silence, the silence of men whose hearts are ill at ease. Then Cecily beckoned to Maurice to fetch his lute; and, sitting down at his grandfather's feet, he sang in a voice of touching sweetness some of the lays that had often soothed his royal master. Perhaps the sweetest of all was an air to which were set some verses composed by another hapless monarch, James I. of Scotland. They were taken from his long poem, the 'King's Quair,' and described his boyish grief at leaving Scotland, his capture, and captivity at Windsor. Then followed the story of his first sight of the Lady Jane Beaufort, afterwards his beloved Queen.

And therewith kast I doun myne èye ageyne
 Where as I saw walkyng under the towere
 Full secretly, new cumyn her to pleyne,
 The fairest, or the freschest younge flowere
 That e'er I saw, methought, before that houre.

According to the quaint conceit of that time, he represents himself as consulting Minerva how best he could win the maiden's love. The Goddess of Wisdom replies—

Be trewe and meeke, and stedfast in thy thoughte,
 And diligent her merci to procure,
 Not onely in thy word, for word is nought,
 But gif thy work and all thy busy cure
 Accord thereto ——

The strain of lamentation turns into one of joy; for, standing one day at his prison-window, he is accosted by a turtle-dove, 'white as calk.' She holds in her beak a gilliflower, on whose leaves are written these words—

Awake! awake! I bring, lover, I bring
 The newes glad that blissful bin and sure
 Of thy confort; now laugh, and play, and sing
 That art beside so glad an aventure,
 For in the Hevyn decretit is thy cure.

'Fairest Mistress Cecily,' John Dutton began, 'since there resideth such witchery in thy brother's voice, what must be the delight of

listening to thine!’ He broke off this preamble with the sense of injury that self-sufficient people are ever ready to entertain, on perceiving that the maiden’s thoughts were far away. The Knight of Dutton was drawing from Sir Piers some account of his doings during the years since they had last met, and she could not choose but hearken to the modest but stirring recital. A glow of pride mantled on her face when Sir Thomas exclaimed—

‘Thou art my younger, Piers, by eight summers; but in the race of honour thou hast outstripped me. Rememberest thou the day, twelve years ago, when we two fought side by side on the bridge of Pontoise?’

‘Full well,’ Piers replied. ‘I won me there (or rather Heaven’s grace bestowed), a true and noble friend and master in Duke Richard of York. From that day he hath not ceased to befriend me; by his intercession some of the forfeited lands inherited by my father’s mother in Staffordshire have been restored to me—else homeless and landless; and but two years since, when sent by the King to crush rebellion in Ireland, he gave me unasked an honourable post in his service.’

‘And a dangerous one,’ interrupted Sir Thomas, laughing. ‘I have heard from one, who was likewise of the Duke’s following, of thy hair-breadth ’scapes among that wild Irishry. But say, brave Piers, where wast thou when the Duke marched upon London, and, thinking to ensnare his enemies, was himself ensnared by crafty Somerset?’

‘I was in France,’ replied Piers, ‘and knew nothing of that rash enterprise for many weeks.’

‘It was my hap,’ said Sir Thomas, ‘to be in London with my noble father-in-law at that time; never shall I forget the day,* when the captive Duke, chafing like a caged lion, was led to the altar of St. Paul’s Church; there, standing amid scores of noble witnesses, peers of the realm and mitred churchmen, he swore on the Holy Cross never to take up arms against the King. By my faith I thought the words would have choked him.’

‘Pray Heaven that oath be never broken!’ observed Sir Ranulph. ‘Thou hast ever, son Piers, reported the Duke of a mild and prudent temper, not one who would lightly plunge his country in civil strife.’

* March 10th, 1452.

‘I think not, dear father,’ answered Piers; ‘but I have heard yourself say that ‘oppression makyth wise men mad.’ ’

At this moment a warning look from the aged knight silenced Piers, and, looking round, he saw behind them the broad figure of the Vicar, Sir Roger. His keen grey eye was fixed on the group with an expression of intense curiosity, but was withdrawn as soon as Sir Piers looked him in the face. With a good deal of tact and readiness, he addressed brief congratulations to the young Knight, then to Sir Ranulph. He added, in a tone of apology, that his brother priest, Sir Armine, having been sent for to shrive a dying man across the hill, he had come to perform compline in his stead. He then retreated to the lower part of the hall, where a few retainers yet lingered. There old Nicholas brought him the usual ‘livery,’ or evening draught of spiced wine, and the two exchanged jests and village gossip together as if on a perfect equality. Parnel hovered about, watching them with no friendly eye, and muttering to herself, ‘There is that fool Nicholas telling yon wily priest all he knows of our household matters, and more! And how to stop his mouth I know not! How

bland and smooth he looks, yet is he biting and treacherous as the Sheffield whittle which men say he carries under his priestly garb.'

Meanwhile Sir Thomas resumed his conversation with Piers. 'I have yet to learn the cause of thine absence from Duke Richard at that eventful time—unless, indeed, it be a mystery not to be pried into.'

'Far from it,' replied Sir Piers, not without agitation. 'The cause is a sad and solemn, but not a secret one. You perchance remember, Sir Thomas, that my grandfather fell fighting against Henry of Bolingbroke, whom he ever regarded as an usurper of the crown. He died a bloody, violent death—a death such as men shrink from, unshriven, unabsolved, in fierce wrath and bitterness. In his last agony he besought my father to make a pilgrimage to the Sepulchre of Christ, and there in that holiest fane to seek mercy for his soul. My father registered a vow to that effect, but year after year passed by in the war with France, and he thought it consisted not with his honour to quit the brave Lord Talbot, under whose banner he fought. Then he was sorely, desperately wounded, and to the anguish of his lingering death-bed was added the more

bitter anguish of that broken vow. I was a child then, of scarce twelve years, but old in thought and cares; and, as I sat by his rude bed, and fanned his feverish brow, and hearkened to his ravings, I divined the cause of his great grief. Kneeling at his side, with both hands in his, I pledged myself, by the help of God, to redeem that vow. He heard and blessed me, and passed away in peace. And now the vow is redeemed. This, too, I owe to the kindness of Duke Richard; who, in regard, as he was pleased to say, of my poor services to the state, hath advanced my fortunes, and given me the power—as the will was ever present—of reaching the Holy Land. On my return I made some tarriance with the brave Knights of Rhodes, hospitable as they are brave; then sailed to Italy, and joined the Earl of Worcester at Rome. There I abode a space, pressing the matter of the dispensation.'

He glanced towards Cecily, and added in a low voice,—

'I have already spoken fully to Sir Ranulph on that subject; the Earl is now returned to London, and bringeth with him our marriage dispensation, duly approved and signed by his Holiness. My trusty Lancelyn, whom I left

at Rome for that purpose, will convey it to me here so soon as he can find a fitting escort through the perturbed midland counties. I look for his coming hourly.'

'This is good news,' answered Sir Thomas, 'and cheering for mine honoured friend Sir Ranulph, in his declining state. But say, good Piers, doth the proverb 'gold unlocks all doors' hold as true of the Roman Cardinals as men say? If not, they are much belied.'

'Doubly—trebly true, I fear,' replied Piers. 'The schism of Avignon, which caused such scandal in Christendom fifty years ago, hath stirred up to the surface of the Church such a scum of corruption and wickedness as fifty years more will not disperse. Indeed, my Lord of Worcester, who is versed in Italian statecraft, told me such things of the policy of Rome as almost made a Lollard of me!'

'Hist, good Piers,' playfully whispered Lettice, who had stolen up to them. 'Hist! or Sir Roger will hear, and report thee to the Convocation at St. Paul's, and thou shalt be delivered over to the secular arm.'

'Dear Lettice!' said Cecily, reprovingly; but the little maiden, nothing abashed, took refuge near Sir Thomas Dutton, whose pet she was;

and while his broad muscular hand smoothed down her golden locks, she looked a mirthful defiance at her sister.

‘Piers,’ said Maurice, ‘I weary to hear more of the siege of Chastillon, and the gallant, gallant Talbot. Oh! say, how died they?—for until thy coming we have seen no eye-witness of the fray.’

‘Ay, speak, brave Piers,’ said Sir Thomas; ‘we are all ear for such a recital.’

‘I was at Rome,’ replied Sir Piers, ‘when the Earl of Shrewsbury summoned me to join his standard in Guienne. I did so, sailing to Barcelona, and crossing the lofty snow-crested Pyrenean hills with much circumspection, for the plain of Guienne swarmed with foes. I reached Bordeaux, and found the aged Earl fortifying the place, putting into it a garrison of Englishmen, and storing it with great store of victuals. After that he rode abroad into the country, and we with him, and towns and cities yielded at once to the terror of his name, without stroke or dint of sword. Amongst other castles, that of Chastillon was delivered to him; the which he strengthened with men and provisions very strongly. Meanwhile the French king, being advertised of these doings,

drew near to oppose the so-renowned chief. His captains laid siege to Chastillon ; the which the stout Earl hastened to relieve, having with him twice four hundred horsemen, led by his son Lord Lisle, the Lords Molyns, Camois, and other esteemed warriors. We marched all night, and reaching the place ere daybreak, fell upon the French archers, and routed them.

‘Vainly did their brave leader, the Sire de Ruault, call them back, exclaiming ‘Have I sworn to live and die with you, and will ye now forsake me?’ They fled, and tarried not till they had reached their entrenched camp, which was near at hand. Then the Lord Talbot entered Chastillon, and before the sun had risen he was on his knees in the abbey church hearing mass devoutly. But ere mass was ended a messenger came with breathless speed, crying ‘My lord, the French are in full retreat ; now is your time.’ The stout Earl rose from his knees, and, burning to revenge the loss of so many fair provinces wrung from England, cried out ‘May I never hear mass again if this day I conquer not those same French!’ He placed his men in order of battle, and rushed like a lion on his prey. ‘My lord,’ said his faithful esquire Thomas Cunningham, ‘beware of

false reports; these men be not retreating, they do but seek to lure you to destruction; have patience, and we shall starve them out.'

'But the Earl would not hearken: he taunted Cunningham with cowardice, and struck him with the flat of his sword across the face. He was ever hot and hasty, but after the first moment of wrath, sweet as summer.

'We reached the entrenched camp, and the onslaught began. Cunningham died first, grasping his lord's banner. The Earl, who by reason of his age and former wounds could not walk, pressed manfully forward on his little well-trained nag. We closed round him, and Lord Lisle would not leave his bridle rein. Alas! it was but too true that the wily Frenchmen had trapped him to his destruction. We struggled for an hour, against fearful odds, but at the last our foes bore us down. The stout Earl's steed was killed, and his thigh broken by a shot from a hand-gun. As he lay there on the ground, his head resting against mine arm, he said to the Lord Lisle, who stood over him, driving the foes back, 'Fly, my son, fly; the battle is lost; fly, and it shall be no reproach to thine honour, in this thy first essay in arms.' But John Talbot would

not fly; he died like a true knight, clasping his father's body in his arms. Then the Frenchmen pressed upon us, and slew the old Earl as he lay.*

'Cowards,' muttered Sir Thomas, clenching his hand, 'to slay him lying on the ground, whom they durst never look in the face while he stood on his feet! And gallant Lisle, too, the son of his old age!' Piers Dutton had listened breathlessly, his blue eyes fixed on the speaker, whose bloodless cheeks and sunken yet flashing eye added force to his narrative. The boy now pressed close to Sir Thomas's side. 'They were happy, father,' he whispered, 'in that they died together.' Sir Thomas wrung his hand, but did not speak.

Sir Piers remained long silent, his hand

* The herald of Lord Shrewsbury sought out the body amongst the heap of slain, wept over it, and embraced it with these pathetic words—'Alas! my lord, and is it thou? I pray God pardon all thy misdoings! I have been thine officer of arms forty years and more, 'tis time I should surrender to thee the ensigns of my office.' Thus saying, with the tears gushing from his eyes, he threw his coat of arms over the corpse.—*Registre de Worksop*. See also HOLINSHED'S *Chronicle* and BARANTE'S *Memoirs*.

shading his face from the light. At last he looked up, and seeing all eyes turned towards him, said in a hollow voice, 'I can tell you nought more concerning the fray; I swooned from loss of blood, and woke from that trance but to find myself a captive. The Lord of Molyms and several of my best friends were prisoners too. How, at the end of fourteen months, we were set free, exchanged for prisoners of our own rank, and how I repaired a second time to Rome, and was there detained, ye already know; and now my tale is done.'

The chapel bell was ringing for compline. This service, never a long one, was recited with such rapidity by Sir Roger, as to occupy a few minutes only. From the little chapel the family at once retired to their bed-chambers; but first Sir Ranulph's three grandchildren, and Sir Piers with them, kneeled at his feet and in lowly voice besought his fatherly blessing.

CHAPTER III.

OF THE CHESHIRE PROPHET ROBERT NIXON.

Though this is madness, yet there's method in't.

Hamlet.

Murder cannot be hid long.

Merchant of Venice.

IF there was joy in the Manor House that evening, there was joy in the cottage too, and of a much noisier and more unmixed kind; for the peasant, used only to think of and toil for the present hour, was not oppressed, like his superior, by the sense of coming evil. There sat Hamo, his hand clasped between those of his mother, surrounded by kinsfolk, friends, and a tribe of gaping, wondering acquaintances. The good man Dale, Hamo's father, stood at his door, and in the exuberance of his delight asked, nay, urged, not only Gralam, but all passers-by, to turn in and drink a health to his boy. Even the leprous beggar, usually shunned, as he roamed through the country with his alms-bowl in one hand and warning clapper in the other, was this

night promised a snug corner in the barn and a mess of pottage to drink there. Many a trip did bright-eyed Gillian make up the ladder that led to their quaint larder amongst the timbers of the roof. She fetched down bread and cheese good store, a supply of bacon, and all that remained of the Christmas hoard of cradle-shaped mincepies. A cask of spiced drink, sent down by kind young master Maurice, contributed to the general merriment. So they all huddled round the rough but plentiful supper-board, and then danced an hour or two to the discordant music of bagpipes and tambourine. Then followed such games as hot-cockles, handy-dandy, or hoodman-blind, exciting peals of laughter and shouts of boisterous mirth.

At first Hamo's newly-acquired notions of refinement interfered a good deal with his pleasure; but he wisely resolved to lay them aside for that evening, and contented himself with scolding Gillian once or twice for dipping her fingers deep in the meat, or shrieking loud while diving for apples in the bucket. Very soon he warmed to the sport thoroughly, and might be seen plunging his hand into the snap-dragon-dish, or thumping his blindfolded comrades on the back as vehemently as any of the

company. The elders sat by, well amused ; and after compline the Vicar dropped in, and jested and quaffed with old and young in such jocund fashion, as to extort a few chuckles even from stolid old Gralam. Only one inmate of the farm seemed to take no part in the general rejoicing : this was a short, thickset boy, about eleven, who sat on the rushes in the darkest corner of the room, scarcely moving, except now and then to creep out of the shadow and spread his hands to the fire. At other times, those misshapen hands shaded his face—a wild-looking, sunburnt face, low-browed, with heavy grey eyes. The boy's matted yellow hair almost hid his forehead, and fell thick and flat upon it, like a field of corn laid by autumn rains. He looked neither ill-clothed, nor ill-fed ; but his features bore the mournful traces of idiotcy, and his groping movements gave token of imperfect eyesight. On the other hand, his hearing seemed remarkably keen. People conversing near, sometimes saw him assume an attitude of close attention, and look up suddenly with an expression half-sad, half-cynical. At this moment the sounds of revelry did not rouse him at all, 'being,' as Goodman Dale jocosely said,

‘in a parlous ill-temper, because he had been beaten with the distaff for stealing the goodwife’s deer’s-milk cheese.’

The lad overheard these words, and looked up with a scowl.

‘Gi’n he had been clemmed for meat,’ continued the farmer, ‘we would none of us have flouted him wi’ the theft; but my goodwoman is but too kind, and gi’es him a’ th’ tit-bits, and o’er much of his own way besides.’

‘Flog him yourself, good man,’ said Sir Roger, with a laugh and scornful glance towards the culprit; ‘no cure for thieving like the crab-tree cudgel, and plenty of it.’

He turned away, without hearing the goodwife’s muttered reply.

‘Not so fast, Sir Vicar; yon’s a fatherless and motherless creature, to whom the Lord hath denied wits, and he shall not be dealt hardly with. Not that he altogether lacketh wit,’ she added, in a lower key, to Gammer Bettiley, who sat beside her; ‘he uttereth hard things sometimes, specially when vexed; and hath, e’en now, made his own country too hot to hold him.’

‘Is it then true, goodwife, that he hath bearded the monks of Vale Royal in their own abbey?’ asked the gammer.

‘Well, aye, I cannot gainsay it; thou knowest those brethren have gotten themselves much hatred from their vassals; they be scarcely better loved now than in the days when Monk John, of Bodeworth, rashly passed the boundary, and the Oldyntons slew him, and played at football with his head! Well, gammer, thou knowest Hal Nixon, Rob’s half-brother, who hath reared him, holdeth his lands under the abbot, William a’Kirkham; he is, they sayen, a bishop of some far-away isle in the west, and never cometh to Vale Royal, save on high days; so the abbey reeve doeth as he listeth, and grindeth the vassals sorely. When Hal’s father died, the reeve, whose name I wot not, bade Hal send him an ox straightway, for his father had owed one many a year, by way of heriot after the late abbot’s death. Hal pleaded he was poor, and hard bestead, and could ill spare it. There was much wrangling between him and the reeve, and the neighbours all held with him; but thou knowest ’tis ill wrangling with cowls; so Hal bade his brother—Rob Want-Wit, they call him—drive the beast to Vale Royal without more ado. The reeve chanced to be by when he came, and railed on Hal for

a grudging knave and a curmudgeon. The ploughman who was sent to take care of Rob says his hair rose upon his head, and his teeth ground together when he heard those words—‘Have a care, Master Reeve,’ quoth he, shaking his fist in the reeve’s face, ‘have a care,—

When the harrow* cleaves this lea
Yon house a raven’s nest shall be.

The reeve’s brow grew dark, and he swore he would put the lad in their lowest prison, and get him burnt for a Lollard; but the neighbours backed Rob manfully. They carried him home on their shoulders, and would have made much ado about him; but Hal, like a discreet lad, stopped them. He hath sent Rob over here to be safe till the scandal is hushed up.’

Whether Goodwife Dale’s confidential communication to Gammer Bettiley would tend to the hushing up of the scandal, is doubtful; the said Gammer being a noted gossip, and

* This prediction is supposed to have come true about eighty years later, when Henry VIII. deposed the abbot, whose name was Harrow, and gave the abbey to Sir Thomas Holcroft, whose crest was a raven.

gossips in the fifteenth century, as now, ever finding ready listeners.

‘I warrant me, Hal is often here to look after Rob,’ she said, pointing her skinny finger at the idiot, but directing her eye maliciously towards Gillian, who, in the glories of a blue boddice and scarlet petticoat, with a new taw-drey of white pebbles round her neck, was footing it featly among the dancers.

‘Ay, sure,’ said the goodwife, innocently, ‘he comes often enough, and is ever praying us to let the lass go home with him afore the Lenten fast sets in; but Gillian hangs back, and says she will not be married till her dear Mistress Cecily hath leave from the Pope to marry too; and now Hal and a troop of them are sent out by the justices in Eyre to clear the passes about Halton of certain bold, bad fellows that swarm there. Verily, the evil days be returned whereof Pierce Plowman sang, when—

In Halton barony only beggars might pass
Without fear of robbynge.

But, name o’ pity, what’s the coil now?’

In fact, a strange outcry was heard. It was not easy to make out its cause, for the home-made candles of beeswax were burning low,

and the great Christmas log had nearly crumbled itself into ashes. The dancers, who were flagging before, stopped, and all pressed forward to gaze on a group at one end of the room. There Gillian, Sir Roger, and a few more were playing at snapdragon, while the idiot, whose sullenness had redoubled since the Vicar's hint of the crabstick, lay with his face towards the ground, uttering low angry sobs. As Sir Roger repeatedly passed by him, the boy turned his head slightly, and eyed him under his mat of hair with no friendly glance. But when the Vicar, whose movements he embarrassed, rudely kicked him aside as lumber, he gave a low snarl, and twisting one leg round Sir Roger's ankle, dragged him heavily down. He fell forward, upsetting the snap-dragon dish, and scorching his face severely. Its expression of rage and pain, seen in the light of the blue flickering flame, was fearful, and made Gillian clasp her hands over her eyes, murmuring—

‘Now the Holy Ones have us in their keeping!’

‘Hold him fast! Goodman Dale, spare not blows!’ cried Sir Roger, seeing the idiot stealthily retreating to the door.

The goodman, exasperated at so tragical a close to his festivities, seized Robin with one powerful hand, and a bludgeon in the other, and dealt some heavy blows. In his passion he might have maimed the luckless boy for life, had not Hamo sprung in between them.

‘Let him go, father, let him go, the poor crazed knave; he was goaded on to this deed in sooth he was, by those who should have known better!’

The goodman paused, feeling the truth of this remark, impressed too by a strange awe-struck look which began to flit over Robin’s features, and gradually stilled their convulsive workings. The boy gathered himself up into a half-sitting, half-kneeling posture, and fixing his eyes on the red embers on the hearth, said slowly and hoarsely—

I see trouble gathering,
Trouble to England, fast and thick.
Through our own gold and our own men
Shall the dreadful strife begin.
Between the sickle and the sock
All England shall have a pluck,
And be once, twice, thrice, forsworn,
And men shall stand in doubt, whether to reap their
corn,
Or go afield to fight, or bury their dead.

He paused, but none interrupted him, and he presently resumed his wailing—

The Bear, long tied to a staff, shall shake his chain,
That all men shall hear it, and quake.
There shall be a winter council, a careful Christmas,
A bloody Lent.

In those days shall be wrath and bloodshed;
Father against son, and son against father!

Three great battles;
Three years of war: the first terrible; the second worse;
The last, ruin!

Beyond the vale where flows Trent's brimming water
I hear a sound of slaughter;—

There, there they fight, the Cheshire gallants fight!
All scorning flight!

The raven on the headless cross that day,
By the edge of the forest grey,
Shall stoop to drink the blood of knight and leader
Staining the purple heather.

On lone church tower a crowned lady stands
And wrings her ivory hands.

Two thousand steeds ride masterless away!
Woe worth the day!

See, fleck'd with blood and foam, one comes this way!

He broke off with a piercing cry, and swift as the arrow from the bow fled out of the cottage. His hearers remained silent and trembling, with bloodless lips and deep-drawn breath. Only Hamo had self-possession enough left to attempt to follow Rob; but his father stopped him, saying—

‘Let him alone, lad; he will not roam further than the cattle-shed. The fit will soon be o’er, and then he shall fall asleep, amid the warm breath of the kye.’

The party broke up, clinging in groups together as if each one was afraid of facing the darkness alone. Half-an-hour later, Hamo and Gillian sought Rob in the cow-house, but in vain. With some anxiety, for the night was bitterly cold, and fresh snow falling, they looked for him in the church-porch, his frequent haunt, but he was not there. They shouted in all directions, but only echo replied. There was no use making further search till daybreak; so about midnight they went to bed, and the tender-hearted Gillian cried herself to sleep.

One more sketch, illustrative of the troublous character of those wild times, will complete our history of that evening.

A small chamber, or rather lean-to, built of stone, juttred from the south-side of the chancel, and was the home of Sir Armine, the chantry priest before spoken of. This unsightly excrescence was partly hidden and much darkened by a large yew-tree, then in its prime, now split and rent and splintering away under the rough usage of centuries. Within the chamber

sat Sir Armine, patiently completing the tasks of the day. They had been arduous; for, besides performing the offices of the church at nine o'clock, noon, and three, he had passed several hours in his daily vocation of teaching the youth of the parish. His school-room was the parvis, or upper-chamber over the south porch; his scholars were the children of neighbouring yeomen and cottagers. Such as were able brought, in return, liberal offerings of bread, fruit, or eggs; such as were poor brought nothing, but were never chidden for it.

Some occasional duty in the parish, thrown upon Sir Armine by the absence of the Vicar since early morning, had made this a peculiarly busy day. Now vespers were over, and the priest was in his cell, teaching a few chosen choristers the mysteries of 'plain song.' Clumsy as the chamber appeared from without, it was picturesque within. A lamp burnt before the crucifix, which was placed against the wall at the east end. Some brackets supported manuscript volumes, bound in white sheepskin, and strengthened with large bosses and clasps of brass. They also held the cumbrous apparatus then used for writing, metal pens, chalk, and pumice-stones, and a sort of razor for

scraping vellum, besides tiny phials labelled 'azure,' 'gold,' and 'vermilion.' All these were ranged on shelves with the utmost care, for Sir Armine was the very soul of order. On the carved oak-stand before him was a hymnal from which he was teaching the boys. Their fair young faces were alternately bent, with a look eager but devotional, on the score before them, or raised to their master, whose rich, full baritone supported their clear trebles. He was a man of about fifty-five, in features and expression much resembling the likenesses we possess of the poet Milton; his eyes blue but piercing; his mouth singularly expressive of firmness yet of meekness; his hair shaven on the crown of the head, but falling thick and long on either side of the pale temples. As the clock, for that church was amongst the few which could boast a clock, struck seven, the priest dismissed his scholars, and taking down a volume of St. Augustin, opened it with the pleasant anticipation of an evening of unbroken study. He paused for a few moments of quiet meditation before beginning to read. The good man's thoughts, usually steeped in peace, were of a still brighter cast to-night; the echoes of the forty-sixth Psalm, *Deus noster Refugium,*

which he had been practising with the choristers, still lingered in his ear and heart, and the exulting strains, 'Therefore will we not fear, though the earth be moved,' and 'There is a river, the streams whereof make glad the city of God,' overpowered for awhile those presentiments of evil which in common with all thoughtful men he could not but entertain. Moreover, the tidings of Sir Piers's return had reached his cell, and he shared truly in the joy of good Sir Ranulph and of his loved pupil Mistress Cecily. For we ever find that those who have tasted most of peace divine, so far from being absorbed and engrossed by it, take the keenest part in the joys and griefs of others. Thus it was that when, half-an-hour later, a loud knocking at the door roused Sir Armine from study, he closed the book with a scarcely audible sigh, and cheerfully girded himself up for some fresh task of charity.

The first glance at the peasant who stood without showed him to be the bearer of evil tidings.

E'en such a man, so faint, so spiritless,
 So dull, so dead of look, so wobegone,
 Drew Priam's curtain at the dead of night.

He could not at first collect breath or

power to speak his errand, but after administering some drops of cordial, Sir Armine drew from him that a murder had been committed on the hill-side, about two miles off. The victim, who appeared to be a retainer of some knight or nobleman, had been attacked by ruffians while riding alone through a wood over against Biddulph Moor. He must have struggled desperately, judging from the many wounds and bruises he had received, and the torn state of his dress. The ruffians had fled at the approach of the peasant with two or three companions; these had discovered the murdered man, and raised him in their arms, with a view to carrying him to the nearest dwelling, but he had groaned piteously, and begged them to desist, and let him die where he lay; only if they would fetch a priest, quick, quick!

‘Oh,’ said the simple-hearted peasant, ‘some sin, or some secret, lieth heavy on his soul! I hastened to fetch the Parson, but he hath been away since early morning, so I come to crave your charity, honoured father.’

Before the pitiful story was concluded, Sir Armine had donned his mantle and hood, and the gypsire, or large pouch, in which were

placed the requisites for extreme unction. And now, staff in hand, he addressed himself to his walk, and was soon vigorously breasting the hill. Here, to his surprise, he encountered the Parson, mounted on a strong palfrey, and riding homewards alone. Sir Armine stopped him, and briefly recapitulated the peasant's narrative, inquiring whether Sir Roger were able and willing to turn back and perform his own proper duty of shriving the dying man. He could not but observe that Sir Roger shook all over, and only muttered a few inarticulate words of reply, like one in a dream.

‘Brother,’ said Sir Armine, earnestly, ‘there is no time to be lost. I pray you decide.’

‘Is he so near his end—the poor caitiff?’ faltered Sir Roger. ‘Then I had best go to him. My nag will bear me faster than your feet will you.’

He slowly turned his horse's head towards Biddulph Moor, pausing, however, to say, with unusual consideration for his colleague,—

‘Hie you home, good brother, and for once despise not my counsel; but drink a cup of spiced ale to keep out the cold.’

He shivered as he spoke, and looked so deadly pale in the light of the peasant's

lantern, that even simple-hearted Dickon perceived it.

‘Somewhat ails him,’ he said, half aloud. ‘He can never reach Biddulph Moor to-night or, if mayhap he does, he will tarry at the first house where the bush hangs out.’

The same idea forcibly struck Sir Armine, and laying his hand on the Vicar’s rein, he said, with grave authority,—

‘Go home, Sir Vicar, and trust the dying man to me; this strange bewilderment of your spirit unfits you to deal with him. Go home, I say, and forget not after curfew to repair to the Manor for the accustomed compline song.’

So saying, he hastened forward, followed by Dickon, whose step was scarcely as firm and elastic as his own. The Vicar looked after them with a bewildered gaze.

‘I am a fool,’ he muttered, striking his forehead, ‘to let him go; yet, no—the wretch hath ere this breathed his last, and dead men tell no tales. It might have bred more suspicion to have held him back; so I will do as he said, show myself at the Manor forthwith, then in the village, with as blithe and jovial a countenance as may be. They shall not guess—not one of them shall guess—

the load that lieth on my soul. Oh, Heaven! am I indeed a murderer? No, not a murderer. It was not my hand that did it. Nay, had he struggled less—had he consented to give up the parchment—I would have bidden them spare his life! He drew destruction on his head by his own stubbornness. Away, fearsome fantasies! The parchment is mine—mine to work mine own ends withal; no cunning alchemy shall be needed to transmute it into gold; and should suspicion arise, my priesthood shall cloke me.'

We leave this bad man to be scourged by his own thoughts, and follow Sir Armine on his errand of mercy. He climbed the hill, sometimes passing under groves of pine-trees freshly-roofed with snow; sometimes up narrow gullies, where deep drifts lay; more often, crossing open tracts of heather. The glittering stars looked down from a moonless sky; no sound was heard, except now and then the cry of some bird startled from its covert; nothing was to be seen but the pure white winding-sheet which covered hill and plain. The steep ascent made connected thought difficult; but when that was passed, Sir Armine's mind naturally reverted to his colleague's strange

perturbed words and gestures. He had long seen him to be an unscrupulous character, a plotter and schemer, suspected, like many others in that age, of dealing in unlawful arts. He knew him of a base, cunning, and revengeful temper, and had more than once defeated his attempts to injure the family of Done. The younger branches of that house had deeply offended Sir Roger by imprudent remarks on his evil life; and Sir Ranulph, as we have seen, had incurred his hatred by thwarting and exposing him in a vile scheme of extortion. Besides this, there was a deeper and older grudge between them. Several years before, a violent contest had arisen between the clergy and the common lawyers, respecting the meaning of a clause in the famous Statute of Premunire. We need not enter into the dry details of this dispute, further than to explain that it arose from an attempt to limit the vast power of the priesthood, and to make them amenable to punishment when they flagrantly broke the laws of the land. Sir Ranulph, then practising in London and much looked up to, had felt himself in conscience bound to side with his legal brethren, and had thereby incurred the ill-will of Sir Roger and of many other ecclesiastics.

For, so great was the excitement produced amongst them by this attempt to curb their power, that in 1447 the two archbishops, with their suffragans and clergy, had presented a petition to Parliament, in which they complained bitterly of the presumption of the 'Courts in Westminster,' and prayed for redress. To this remonstrance the Parliament paid no regard, and so the clergy and the lawyers remained at open variance.

These disputes, so embittering to worldly minds, did not greatly affect the tenor of Sir Armine's thoughts. Not that he was ignorant of the course of affairs. In early life he had been a distinguished Fellow of Oriel College, and had won the friendship of Reginald Pecock, now Bishop of Chichester, and other learned and pure-hearted men. Later on in his career he had been tutor to the celebrated Tiptoft, Earl of Worcester, one of the most literary men of the day, and had been much beloved by him. Sir Ranulph knew his worth; and when at his own cost he generously placed his ward Piers Holforde at Baliol for a year or two, he bespoke for him, as the best of blessings, Sir Armine's friendship and guidance. One or other of these distinguished friends (patrons we may

not call them, for Sir Armine was not a man to be patronized) would gladly have bestowed upon him rich preferment. For reasons, however little understood by men, but good and sufficient in the eye of God, he steadily declined it, and chose a lowly, hidden path. So he went on, doing his duty, praying hourly for the Church he loved, and whose corruptions were his deepest grief, and even from that quiet nook shining forth 'as a light in a dark place.'

If any suspicions of Sir Roger's being accessory to the late act of violence crossed his colleague's mind, he put them away with horror, as contrary to the 'charity which thinketh no evil.' Still a painful mystery hung over the whole matter, and he pressed on, anxious to have it solved. He had now reached the crest of the hill, and met the full force of a sweeping easterly blast. A few twinkling lights from hovels below showed that the little hamlet of Biddulph was near; but by making a short cut through the wood he avoided it, and soon reached the scene of the murder. The dying man lay under a wide-spreading pine-tree, his head supported on the lap of a wild-looking old woman, fetched in

haste from the moor. Two peasants were standing near; a third had scraped away the snow close by, and made a blazing fire of dry sticks. And now Sir Armine stole up to the sufferer's side, and looked into the ghastly face, on which the hue of death was gathering. The tightly-clenched hands, and laboured breathing that could be heard afar off, gave token that the last struggle was at its height.

'Hoo's well 'igh gone, father,' whispered the peasant, doffing his bonnet. 'Hoo's driving heed-lyng into t'other warld.'

'I see it, my son,' replied the priest.

After signing the Cross on the dying man's brow, and reciting a short collect, he addressed himself to easing his bodily pain. He bade Dickon fetch water from the spring, stanchd and bound up the wounds on which the gore was stiffening, and moistened the black, fevered lips. That healing touch evidently brought a sense of refreshment to the sufferer, for his breathing grew more gentle, and his upturned eyes lost their wild stare of distress. Consciousness and hearing, it was clear, were still his, though sight was gone, and the eager, almost frantic, attempts to speak were utterly vain. Shrift was therefore impossible, and Sir

Armine, signing to the bystanders to withdraw a little space, said, in the dying man's ear, 'My son, confess thy sins unto God; He knoweth the secrets of all hearts.'

There was a pause of some minutes; then Sir Armine recited the office for the dying, according to the ritual of the Church of Rome. Its sublime and awful strains thrilled through his own soul, but fell cold on the dying ear, for they were uttered in Latin, a tongue all but unknown to the rude man at arms. Only when the blessed and saving Name was spoken, he roused himself, and a gleam of intelligence passed over his face. It riveted Sir Armine's gaze, and the certainty that he had seen those features before came suddenly upon him. Life was ebbing away, so he proceeded at once to administer the rite of extreme unction. The hands, tightly clenched before, now willingly unclosed to receive the consecrated oil, and as they did so, a scroll fell from them. True to his trust, even to the last gasp, the dying man tried to retain it between his fingers. Sir Armine replaced it there; his lips moved, he pressed the scroll tightly to his breast, and expired.

After a brief interval of devotion, Sir Ar-

mine rose from his knees, and assisted the peasants reverently to bear the body to a neighbouring hovel. Before doing so, he carefully placed the scroll in his own bosom; he then, in the presence of Dickon, examined the dead man's gypsire; but whatever money or valuables it might have contained were gone. While thus employed, his eyes fell on the vest, which a cloak had hitherto concealed, and, with unspeakable horror, he saw embroidered upon it the 'greyhound passant'—the well-known cognizance of the Holfordes.

CHAPTER IV.

OF THE SISTERS.

Turn my dreamings into earnestness.

BISHOP ANDREWES.

THE next morning Cecily and Lettice rose before daylight, as was their wont. They dressed themselves by the light of a taper, and leaving their little turret dormitory in perfect order, repaired to their several avocations. Lettice lightly sprang down-stairs. Her first care was to seek out Maurice, whom she found superintending the falconers in the important business of feeding the hawks, which sat on perches at the lower end of the hall. She had much to say to these her winged favourites, stroking their glossy heads, helping to examine the state of their claws, and sharply reproving the greedy amongst them. After that she repaired to an enclosed garden within the moat, in order to gather thyme, mint, sweet-marjoram, and other herbs to strew among the fresh rushes

in her grandfather's chamber. A few sprigs were reserved for the sisters' bower, or 'Paradise,' as it was usually called.

'Piers will surely find his way thither,' she said; 'and they will give him a fresh and fragrant greeting.'

Cecily meanwhile had repaired to the said Paradise, which, in truth, was not undeserving of the title. It was a small octagon, at the top of the house. Three narrow windows with curiously-shaped panes of thick glass lighted it, and formed a sort of bay looking over rich pasture-lands to the hills bordering on Derbyshire; the bold bluff eminence, called Cloud End, stood out conspicuously amongst them. The walls of Cecily's bower were coloured green and white, and an image of St. Dorothea, supposed to be a protection against lightning, stood in a niche over the arched doorway. Fireplace there was none; and our Cheshire maidens—far hardier then than now—dreamed not of such a luxury. The little silver chafing-dish, which old Parnel brought up on unusually wintry mornings, supplied all the heat they needed. The vaulted ceiling of this room was upheld by a slender column; which, however, widened at the foot, so as to admit of 'coffers

within and ledges without,' for the safe keeping of the maidens' private treasures. Letitia's consisted mostly of pieces of ivory and fine-grained woods, which, with rude instruments but with marvellous skill, she had taught herself to carve. An ivory figure of St. Cecilia, fashioned to please her sister, had been her last performance; and now she was busy preparing a surprise for Maurice in the shape of a tankard of walnut-wood. On one side she had carved, with great spirit and delicacy of touch, three 'alauntes,' or bull-dogs, dragging down a wild boar; on the other, a 'fearful hart of force' flying from its pursuers. The lid was wreathed round with oak-leaves, and rose in the centre into a sheaf of arrows.

Except this recreation and singing, for which she had a natural gift, Lettice had few indoor amusements. She read and wrote a little daily to please Cecily, and now and then volunteered to help (or hinder) Parnel in the arrangement of the store-room; but all her delights were in the good 'greenwood,' and on the breezy hillside, especially when Maurice was at home; and it was no small privation to her that, owing to the increasing lawlessness of the neighbourhood, her grandfather had

strictly forbidden all solitary rambles for the future.

Trained up by her accomplished Burgundian mother, Cecily had received a better education than most girls of that day. She spoke and read French and Italian, as well as her own language, with perfect ease, knew Froissart's and Joinville's Chronicles by heart, and had even studied Dante's awful pages. Sir Armine had taught her Latin, and led her to read and enjoy the deep wisdom of St. Augustin and St. Bernard. And now, in the silent morning hour, her orisons ended, and the tasks of housewifery not yet begun, she stole a little quiet time for her favourite pursuits. A slender but richly-emblazoned volume, containing Petrarch's exquisite 'Trionfo della Morte,' lay open before her. It had been sent to her by Piers from Rome, and the tender beauty of many of its lines had soothed her first grief for the loss of her mother. Of some of the most beautiful she was now attempting a translation, which ran thus:—

(' Like some cleere flame not quencht by manne's rude
wille,
But slowly waning in the morninge raie,
Or as the light of taper, soft and stille,
That silently dyes out, so past awaie

The willinge spiritte. Beautifulle in dethe
Was the faire face, with parted golden haire ;
Not pallid,—no, but white as the snow-wreathe
That rests unruffled by a breathe of aire
On yonder eastern hille. Like one shee laie
O'er whom kinde sleepe hath stolen unawares,
Tired with the heate and burthen of the daie ;
And round her parted lippes and scarce closed eie
Hover'd a smile, sweet farewellle to earth's cares ;
Sweet foretaste of that better lyfe on highe !'

It took Cecily fully an hour to transcribe these lines, the act of writing being, in fact, a far harder task to her than the composing of them. Her naturally poetical mind was now overflowing with happiness, of a pensive kind indeed, and shaded with anxiety, but pure and blissful. An hour of quiet talk with Piers the previous afternoon had broken down all painful reserve, and so strengthened her confidence in his goodness and his affection, as to make the prospect of sharing her future lot with his seem very bright. The love and reverence with which he spoke of her mother, asking all details of her last days, and treasuring up the message she had left with Cecily for him, was another link between them. And now Cecily could look back with calm thankfulness to that deathbed, and find delight in translating the

passage which recalled it most vividly to her memory. So absorbed was she in the work, that she did not notice Lettice's entrance till a soft arm was flung round her neck. The maiden had scattered her treasure of sweet dewy sprays and rushes upon the floor, and was now trying to spell out Cecily's writing.

'This is fair penmanship, indeed,' she cried. 'Why, the monks in Abbot Simon's Scriptorium at Chester, handle not the pen more cunningly! those fine strokes are delicate as the texture of a spider's web, while mine, alas! resemble the track that spider would leave if bedaubed with ink. I would, my Cecily, I had profited by thy teaching better.'

This unwonted gush of tenderness, for Lettice was rarely demonstrative except to Maurice, took Cecily by surprise. She could only draw Lettice down, and place her on her knee, and look into the half-averted face, whose troubled, almost reproachful, expression cut her to the heart.

'And now thou art going from us,' pursued Lettice; 'Parnel hath told me so; the dispensation will be here anon, and ere carnival time thou shalt be wedded to Piers and be gone. Maurice must depart also; and then poor

Lettice will be left alone. And, Cecily, thou dost rejoice to go; Parnel saith so, and I read it in thy face.'

'Parnel oversteppeth the bounds of discretion and speaketh without warrant,' replied Cecily, blushing deeply. 'I do love Piers, and think of becoming his wife with no other sorrow than that of being all unworthy of him; but deem not, Lettice, thou shalt lose a sister by this union—nay, rather, thou hast won a brother, and Piers will help me to fulfil my vow to our dying mother, and shield thy youth, sweet child, from sorrow and evil.'

'Then he will not carry thee away to Wigmore Castle, or to London?' inquired Lettice.

'He will not,' answered Cecily, smiling; 'and thou mayst tell old Parnel so. I hope to tarry with our grandfather and thee till Michaelmas; then, if God send prosperity, we will remove to the house near Drayton, which Piers hath inherited from his mother. He saith the air is marvellously fresh and pure, and will revive our grandfather; and for thee, my Lettice, there is the broad expanse of Blore and Ashley, with its uplands and hollows, its pools and streams for hawking, and high fern where deer and black game lie hidden.'

An eager kiss from Lettice was the only reply; and she was flying to impart the news to Parnel, when the old woman entered, bearing the sisters' light breakfast. It consisted of new milk and little cup-shaped cakes of fine flour; refecton enough in those days when dinner was served not later than ten o'clock.

Letitia flung her arms round her nurse's neck, and was beginning 'Ah, Parnel, thou croaking raven, thou prophetess of evil—' when the old woman interrupted her sharply—'An if I be, 'tis the fault of these evil times; but heyday, my Lady Wisdom, what have you done? Are these the herbs of grace to strew for your sister's bridal? See here, rosemary and rue lying at her feet. Pray Heaven the rue bring not ruth, and the rosemary mourning!' The child gathered herself up, shuddering—

'Ah me! what have I done, in my wild heedlessness?' she said; then flinging herself on her knees, she picked up the offending herbs, and crushed them underfoot. But Cecily stopped her. 'My Lettice, look not pale, as though some injury were done; these fair sprays of God's creating can no more hurt me than thou thyself, sweetheart. At worst, they are but gracious warnings of coming sorrow.'

'Tis gently thought, and softly said,' observed Parnel; 'and in sooth I am sorry I spake so sharply, but the toothache hath vexed me more than ordinary this last night.'

'My poor nurse!' said Lettice, 'and hath the touch of St. Apollonia's tooth failed this time to relieve thee?'

'Oh, I say not that, I say not that, absolutely,' replied the old woman; 'I tried it yester even while Mistress Cecily was at her orisons in the chantry, and it brought some abatement of the smart; but 'tis my belief, and that of many others, that it hath lost some of its virtue since the silver casket that enshrined it hath been purloined; nay, smile not, Mistress Lettice, so saucily! But, in truth, my slumbers last night were sore broken by the strange noises, and opening and shutting of doors, and goings to and fro in the house.'

'What goings to and fro?' asked Cecily; 'speak, dear Parnel.'

'Marry, that will I, for you look as scared as Mistress Lettice did just now. Well, after compline I went to Sir Piers's chamber to see whether his wounds needed redressing, but he made reply right courteously that my unguents had already wrought a cure. Oh, 'tis a brave

gentleman, and a well-spoken, yet I could not but chide with him for choosing to sleep in the truckle bed in one corner of the state chamber, rather than on the fair carved bedstead, inlaid with ebony and box. You know, Mistress Cecily, you did entrust the lodgment of your guests to my discretion, and I, with some breach of courtesy towards the Knight of Dutton, placed Sir Piers in the best apartment; nay more, I decked it with mine own fair quilt and hangings of cramoisi silk, the gift of Duchess Michelle of Burgundy, after my leechcraft had recovered her from a sickness. Priceless they are, and of a texture unknown in this rude corner of England. Yet Sir Piers chose the truckle bed, and Gralam, boor as he is, begged as a boon to sleep on straw by his horses. Well, I doubt if either of them tasted an hour's sleep last night, for at midnight there was a knocking at the outer gate, not loud but long. The porter was hard to wake, and Nicholas harder still; but at length they opened, and Nicholas thrust forth his head and asked, 'Who cometh hither at this untimely hour?'

'It is I, the chantry priest,' replied the voice of Sir Armine; 'let me speak with Sir Piers Holforde.'

‘Oh then old Nicholas bestirred himself, and straightway bade the porter unlock the postern-door and lower the drawbridge. By their lantern’s light I saw Sir Armine let in, and with him two men whom he called ‘honest fellows,’ and commended to Nicholas.’

‘Did Sir Armine see Piers?’ asked Lettice.

‘He did; Hamo, who had but just come in from his father’s house, led him to the state chamber, and saith the knight started up from his pallet at the first sound as though the French were upon him; but when he saw Sir Armine he bent him reverently and kissed his hand with great joy. They communed privately for a space, then came forth, Sir Piers dressed, and armed with sword and dagger, and wearing a stern and troubled brow. He conferred with the two men, then woke Sir Thomas Dutton; after this they went forth together, and Gralam and Hamo with them, and truly I wot not if they be yet returned.’

‘And can no one guess the cause of this so great stir?’ asked Cecily, in a trembling voice.

‘Not justly, for the knights left strict orders that no ill rumours should be carried to Sir Ranulph; but doubtless there is murder at the bottom of it. I see terror in old Nicholas’s

face, and what little wit was left him before, is clean gone this morning.'

'Haste, haste down-stairs, sister,' cried Lettice; 'here come the knights. See, they dismount at the drawbridge, and Gralam is leading away their steeds. Lo, there goes Maurice to meet them. Something hath ruffled his spirit, I can see. Let us go down and end this hated suspense.'

With one mute upward glance Cecily followed her impulsive sister to the hall. There she lingered behind; but Piers sought her out, and in a few words told the tale of horror.

It was his faithful pursuivant Lancelyn who had been slain, by hands unknown, on the lonely hillside. While removing the body to Bidulph hamlet, Sir Armine had met two stout yeomen on horseback seeking the murdered man. After the first burst of horror at sight of his corpse was over, they had introduced themselves as Lancelyn's brothers, and shown Sir Armine a short missive dictated by Lancelyn the evening before, but only received by them two hours ago. In this he hinted that he was the bearer of an important document; and for that reason, not from cowardice, had waited some days in London for a sufficient

escort. He had just reached Helegh Castle, the Lord Audeley's strong place in North Staffordshire, and from thence intended to ride as far as Biddulph, next morning, with some of the Audeley retainers, who were going that way. He sent this greeting by a peasant named Skelhorne, to his brothers, men of substance on the Lord of Audeley's manor of Smallwoode, and bade them meet him at the Biddulph hostel by three that afternoon at latest. It was past five, the brothers said, ere the billet reached them, and then it was brought by a crazed boy who called himself Rob Wantwit, and who told an incoherent story of having picked it up open, near the hostel on the village green. Skelhorne, he said, was taking a cup of ale there with Sir Roger's serving-man. They had hastened to Biddulph with all speed, and learnt there that the unhappy pursuivant, weary of waiting, had set forth to cross the hill two hours before. A vague rumour of some mischance had sharpened their search after him, and now the dreadful truth burst upon them at once.

The early morning had been spent in a vain pursuit of the murderer or murderers, and every house in the village had been searched

but the priest's, which was exempt by law from all domiciliary visits. Two peasants only were missing from their homes ; one was Skel-horne, the other a noted thief and vagabond, who had earned a precarious and dishonest livelihood for years at fairs and bear-baits. Both had been suspected for a good while of an intention of deserting their families, and joining the Welsh or Northern outlaws. There seemed little doubt that they were the villains who had attacked Lancelyn, and the disappearance of his horse and of whatever money he might have carried about him, gave sufficient motive for the foul deed. Sir Roger, who had proffered his services in attempting to detect the criminals, warmly and noisily supported this opinion.

As for the dispensation of which Lancelyn had been the bearer, the search for that seemed hopeless. No one could gainsay the truth of Sir Roger's observation, that the murderers were certain to destroy it at once, because it could not in any way benefit them, and if found in their hands, would be an unanswerable proof of their guilt. Nothing, therefore, remained but to send notice of the murder to the Sheriffs of Cheshire and Staffordshire, and to the in-

ferior officers of justice. This done, the family gathered in the hall for dinner, which was despatched silently and sadly. The gentlemen kept up some conference respecting the events of the night, but in subdued voices.

Sir Ranulph, to whom the whole matter had been unfolded, and who had entered into its details with great coolness and sagacity, now flagged, and leaned back in his chair exhausted. At his desire Cecily sat next to him. She bore up nobly, though her grandfather's increased tenderness of manner, and look of watchful sympathy, tried her calmness not a little. So did the pale, haggard, and depressed countenance of Piers, on whom the double blow of trusty Lancelyn's death, and the indefinite postponement of his marriage, had fallen most heavily. The knight who had encountered death without shrinking, to whom pain and hardship were familiar things, now for a moment felt his firmness give way. But one long pressure of Cecily's hand, when none were observing them, one steadfast look in her face, almost angelic in its expression of meek sadness, did much to restore his courage. He turned his thoughts to the best way of remedying the evil, and decided on going up to London after Lancelyn's

funeral, and consulting his friend Lord Worcester, who was well acquainted with the Court of Rome, and could negotiate for him there.

The Pope, it was thought, having once consented to ratify the dispensation, would scarcely demur to doing so a second time, and so in a few months the negotiation might be brought to a happy close.

As the morning wore away, a less uncheerful spirit crept over the whole party, and Sir Thomas Dutton's remarks and anecdotes began to be listened to, and to provoke replies; and at last the most outwardly gloomy individual of the company came to be Maurice, whose dignity had been excessively hurt by the fact of no one having called him up or required his help on the previous night. He sat sullenly aloof, unable to forgive Piers and the Duttons for this neglect, or himself for having slept so soundly through the whole disturbance. But even his 'doleful dumps,' as Lettice called them, gave way at last, before her blandishments. In watching the hawks with her he forgot his grievances; and the last shade of ill-temper vanished when Piers, passing by, tapped his shoulder and said,—

'Maurice, my heart yearned towards thee as

I went by thy chamber door last night ; had it been a chivalrous foe instead of a base dastard we were in search of, credit me, brave boy, thou shouldst not have lacked thy part in the adventure.'

In the afternoon the Duttons and their train took a kindly, though formal leave of Sir Ranulph, and rode away to Helegh Castle. Before their departure they listened with interest to the letter written by Lord Worcester to Sir Piers from Rome, and, together with the dispensation, conveyed to England by Lancelyn. It was the very scroll which the brave pursuivant had struggled to the last to retain in his grasp ; and if, when receiving it from Sir Armine's hand, Lancelyn's master let a few tears fall upon the paper, they were surely no reproach to his knighthood.

The wording of the epistle ran thus. The spelling we venture to modernize :—

*' To the Right Worshipful Knight, Piers Holforde,
be this delivered in haste.*

' Right trusty and my beloved and special friend, I commend me to your love, and heartily thank you for your right welcome and well-

advised letters to me, sent from time to time, and so pray you of your good continuance.

‘I think that I send herewith that which will gladden your heart, and I trust in Heaven that you shall hold you pleased, even as I am pleased to have been an instrument in procuring the same. The manner whereof, and the cause of sundry delays I will now lay before you.

‘There hath been a marvellous change in his Holiness Nicholas V. sith with you I visited his presence-chamber. Since the unhappy complot against his life made by Stefano Porcari, for which he and nine associates were hanged from the battlements of St. Angelo, his Holiness shutteth himself up in his new palace at Santa Maria Maggiore. The fair churches of the Lateran and San Paolo, built at his cost—the Capitol, ruinous before, but now re-edified by him—the walls, gates, and towers of Rome, newly raised from their dust—all these he hath ceased to delight in, his mind being taken up by the fear of assassins. Moreover, his spirit is grievously fretted by the woful falling of Constantinople into the hands of the miscreant Turks; and he ceaseth not to write letters to all princes and potentates, praying they will wipe away that foul blot from Christendom.

Many a time have I sought an interview with him touching your matter; and I obtained it at last by presenting him with a rare Egyptian manuscript, else destined, with others to the value of 500 marks, for my mother Oxforde. Each avenue to the palace was guarded, but his Holiness sat alone in his library, surrounded with the fairest and most glorious books and missals ever collected since the burning of Alexandria. The sight of him in his monk's frock and cowl, of his sunken cheeks, and tear-stained, deject look, moved me much. He hath you in kindly remembrance, but speaketh bitterly of England, calling her a refractory daughter, whose clergy and laity be both ill-affected. He complained to me that our gracious King hath paid no heed to the bull sent him with a rose of pure gold by his predecessor, Pope Eugenius, bidding him compel the clergy to pay their required tenth to the treasury of Rome. I made answer that our King's woful malady and the growing distractions of our realm alone hindered him from obeying the behests of his Holiness. Thus I soothed him, and brought him round to the matter in hand, the which he hath duly signed and sealed. After that the Pope burst forth

into passionate lamentation, and bemoaned himself that, though he had striven to be a peacemaker to Rome and the world, yet all men sought his life. 'I have found no man,' said he, weeping bitterly, 'to speak to me the language of truth.' Many think that his end draweth near; may he find truth and peace in the true Home of the just, for verily I myself do think they have perished out of the earth.

'And now, my right good friend, I pray God have you in his keeping, and hoping shortly to see you in London, rest

'Yours in all sincerity,

'JOHANDE DE TIPTOFT,

'*Earl of Worcester.*'

CHAPTER V.

OF THE DECISION.

Warwick. I love no colours, and without all colour
Of base insinuating flattery
I pluck this white rose, with Plantagenet.

Suffolk. I pluck this red rose.

SHAKESPEARE.

WE stand on the threshold of civil war—the War of the Roses, as for four hundred years this strife has been called. The name is only too fair and sweet-sounding for that fatal quarrel which thirty years sufficed not to compose, in which twelve pitched battles were fought, the most savage cruelties perpetrated, eighty princes of the blood slain, and two-thirds of the old nobility of England exterminated.*

So equally balanced were the claims of York and Lancaster, that honest and honourable men could scarcely decide to which their allegiance was due. Richard of York was the son of the ill-fated Earl of Cambridge, beheaded in the reign

* So says HUME, in his *History of England*. See Reign of Henry VI.

of Henry V. By his mother, Anne Mortimer, he was descended from Philippa, only daughter of the Duke of Clarence, second son of Edward III.; his claim to the crown was therefore superior to that of Henry VI., who derived his descent from that King's third son, John of Gaunt. On the other hand, the House of Lancaster had now been established on the throne more than fifty years, and the nation was bound to it by many oaths of fealty. This argument would doubtless have sufficed to preserve the public peace, had the nation been tolerably well governed; but it was lamentably otherwise. Henry VI., the 'meek usurper' of a thorny crown, had never possessed any talent as a statesman; and now the growing infirmity of his brain rendered him a cypher in the eyes of his subjects. Queen Margaret, the creature of impulse, capricious, vindictive, at one time carried away by self-will, at another a tool in designing hands, cruel to her opponents, but indescribably fascinating to those she regarded with favour, had for several years been an object of aversion to the people. Her unhappy connivance, or what seemed to be such, at the murder of 'good Duke Humphry,' and now the 'warre,' as Holinshed calls it, 'so foully ended in forren parts,' deepened that

aversion into hatred. While the King, to use the same chronicler's words, 'laie senseless, and was not able either to goe or stande,' matters remained quiet. There was something in the chivalrous and gentle temper of the Duke of York which would not allow him to make the King's calamity an occasion for asserting his own rights. But two events which caused unbounded joy among the Lancastrians spurred him on to action, and in the end proved the ruin of his enemies. The first was the birth of Margaret's son, the ill-fated Prince Edward; an event which drove the Duke of York to seek by arms that crown which he could no longer hope peaceably to inherit. The second was King Henry's partial recovery of reason. While still weak and unable to attend to business, the Queen had him conveyed to the House of Lords; there, prompted by her, he dissolved the Parliament, put an end to the Duke of York's Protectorate, and released Somerset, the Duke's bitterest enemy, from the Tower.

The ex-Protector indignantly withdrew from London to his castle of Wigmore, in Herefordshire; and there brooded, but not idly, over his wrongs. He began secretly to collect troops and rally his adherents round him; and this

with the less compunction because he considered the King a mere puppet in the hands of a faction—that faction headed by the woman whom he most hated and despised. And now counties, neighbourhoods, and families began to be split up into endless divisions and shades of opinion. Those were days not so much of theory as of practice; and political disputes were decided not by word or pen, but by force of arms. Those days form a kind of middle stage between history as it was in the early ages, when, to use Dr. Arnold's words, 'its active elements were kings, popes, bishops, lords, and knights,' the 'other members of society remaining passive;' and history as it was a century later, when the great body of the nation, traders, yeomen, and peasants, began to take an active part in politics. Even now the English yeomen formed an important body, many of them being men of substance, and sending their sons to Oxford or Cambridge. The cottagers, too, serfs or villeins, as they had been called, were beginning to enjoy a greater share of liberty than heretofore. They were, in fact, progressing towards the condition of our own labourers, being no longer transferred from master to master, as part and parcel of the

estate they lived upon, but for the most part free to choose their own employers. In every farm, therefore, and in every hovel, the claims of York and Lancaster began to be discussed. The village barber was usually the leading politician and grand retailer of public news, or rather of rumours, often false and contradictory, gathered from passing travellers and from the wandering minstrels and jugglers, then called *trégetours*.

It is not easy for us to realize to ourselves a state of things in which, printing being unknown, there were no newspapers to enlighten the mind, or to mislead and inflame it; when writing was an art confined to the educated and to the clergy, and when the post-office, with all its wonderful machinery, did not exist. The tidings of great events, instead of flying like wild-fire from end to end of the kingdom as they do now, crept slowly along; but they did not the less create a fearful excitement. The King's re-appearance in the House of Lords, and the Protector's dismissal, were the theme of all men's discourse; and it needed not Rob Wantwit's gift of prophecy to see that blood would soon flow.

Deep were the cogitations of Sir Piers Hol-

forde as to the course it behoved him to adopt. Principle and feeling alike bound him to the House of York and to its Duke, whom he regarded as an oppressed and persecuted man, ill requited for his moderation in having so long forborne to assert his right to the throne. Perhaps, too, Piers' private wrongs weighed with him more than he was aware. The death of his grandfather, cut off by the hands of the executioner after Shrewsbury fight, his father's ruined fortunes and broken heart, these were not things to be forgotten easily, or remembered without bitterness. But Piers, though not exempt from the turbulent spirit of those times, was at heart both just and merciful; and the idea of a civil war struck him with unspeakable horror. It broke his rest by night, and oppressed his thoughts by day. Deeply did he deplore the Queen's rash haste in annulling the Protectorship, and thus breaking the last feeble links that bound Richard of York and his kinsman and chancellor the Earl of Salisbury, to their allegiance.

Sir Piers' private affairs wore a more hopeful aspect. He had gone up to London at the end of January, and had had several audiences of the Duke and the Earl of Worcester; both of

whom readily promised him their aid towards replacing the lost dispensation. About the middle of February he travelled into Staffordshire, and spent some weeks at his newly-acquired residence near Drayton.* It was a happy and hopeful occupation to bring the neglected property into order, and prepare a meet home for Cecily, as soon as the uncertainties that now darkened their prospects should have cleared away. Here the rumour of the Duke's flight to Wigmore reached Piers, whose first impulse was to hasten to him; but a letter on important business from Sir Armine, giving besides an alarming report of Sir Ranulph's health, happily came to hand at the same time, and decided him on going round by Newbolde Manor. Ere sunset that evening he had reached it.

As he rode through an oak coppice which divided the house from the village, he observed a figure stealthily gliding through the underwood, alongside of him, and watching his movements. With a feeling of irritation against the supposed spy, he called out—

‘ Who goeth there ? ’

* Drayton in Hales, a town situated in Shropshire, but on the border of Staffordshire.

‘A friend and comrade’ was the reply, in a clear though suppressed voice; and the figure bounded forward, but as quickly retreated at the sound of footsteps approaching through another opening in the wood.

Piers recognised in this third person his crafty and dangerous acquaintance the Vicar, and saw the need of caution.

‘Bracy,’ he said, ‘I will return anon; tarry for me here.’

‘I may not tarry,’ Bracy made answer. ‘I am from Wigmore, and bear tidings to the Nevilles at Middleham, which brook no delay; keep thine eyes open, and thou shalt receive a token from me to-night.’

He disappeared among the brown bracken, and Piers rode on musingly.

‘Good even, Sir Knight,’ said the Vicar, accosting him in his usual manner, half-bland, half-cynical. ‘Like you, I am on my way to the Manor, to tender my service to Sir Ranulph. I trust you will find your kinsman less altered than report saith. When last I saw him, on the Feast of Perpetua, he wore a drooping aspect.’

‘Is it so long since he hath heard matins or vespers in church?’ asked Piers; ‘then must he indeed be indisposed.’

‘ My brother Armine can satisfy you better than I on that point,’ replied Sir Roger ; ‘ he doth enjoy that access to the sick chamber which to me, causeless, is denied. Only from the tongue of rumour did I learn Sir Ranulph’s sickness, three weeks ago ; and now that same rumour reporteth him so far amended as to meditate an immediate journey and prolonged absence ; yet this seemeth scarcely possible.’

He looked keenly in his companion’s face for some answer to the half-query ; but Sir Piers only replied in his bluff manner—

‘ I have heard of some such purpose.’

On passing within the drawbridge they saw two or three carts standing in the inner court, and the servants employed in loading them. Kitchen apparatus, bedding, tapestry, chairs and tables stood ready to be packed under the eye of old Parnel ; for in those days, when people travelled, they carried the bulk of their furniture and valuables with them. Parnel was engaged in laying the Duchess Michelle’s crimson quilt in a safe corner, where, as she said, it ‘ should neither be rumped nor wetted ;’ but she started up to bestow a hearty greeting on her foster-son, and to reply to his inquiries after Sir Ranulph.

‘The good Knight my master,’ she said, drawing Piers on one side, ‘hath drooped ever since the death of Lancelyn. He wearied himself in a vain pursuit after the murderers, and Nicholas doth aver that his sleep became troubled and his food distasteful from that day. Moreover, the suavity of his temper changed to an unwonted sharpness, as Master Maurice found, to his cost, before he left us for Eton ; the rash boyish quips that used to provoke a smile from the old knight, now moved him to choler more often ; and things would have gone ill, but for Mistress Cecily’s sweet daughterliness and my Lettice’s loving, wilful sway over Master Maurice. Well, he went, and three days after, on the morrow of St. Perpetua’s feast, Mistress Cecily going, as her custom was, to lead Sir Ranulph to supper, found him stretched in a trance on the floor. She called me to her aid, poor child ! and I, being used to leechcraft, and perceiving that the peril was great, did use my lancet quickly. Sir Ranulph revived, but for many days could not rise from his sick bed ; and even now his strength is small, and his speech oft-times impeded.’

‘May I have access to him ?’ asked Piers.

‘Doubtless, doubtless,’ she answered; ‘he will be fain to see you; and with him, or in the antechamber, if he sleep, you will find Mistress Cecily, who scarce leaveth him day or night. He cannot bear her out of sight; and when his sickness was sorest, did use to gaze after her wistfully, murmuring ‘Poor child! poor child!’ One day, in the greatness of his trouble, he craved speech of Sir Armine, and they have had divers conferences; the which (Heaven be praised therefor), have mightily refreshed my master’s spirit.’

‘Know our neighbours the intent of this sudden journey?’ asked Piers.

‘In sooth, not one of them,’ replied Parnel, sharply, while the colour came up in her wrinkled cheeks. ‘The secret is revealed to none, and some that might well be trusted are left to guess at it. More’s the pity, say I, for thereby much prying and saucy questioning is bred. Old Nicholas thinketh it hard he is not told; of myself I speak not, for, seeing I have an infirmity of talking in my sleep, I rather chose to be ignorant, and did stop mine ears when Mistress Letitia seemed on the point of imparting to me all she knew.’

‘Well, dear Parnel, I fear I shall prove less

discreet than thou,' said Piers, with a momentary smile. 'I burn to know the wherefore and whither of this sudden journey; and when learnt, shall scarce be able to hide them from my good foster-mother.'

'Now Heaven bless thee!' muttered Parnel, gazing after him as he strode through the hall, 'for the gentlest-natured as well as the doughtiest knight in Cheshire. Well doth thy prime fulfil the promise of thy boyhood—nay, of thy sweet infancy! Ah, well-a-day, I remember as though 'twere yesternight the hour when first I held thee in mine arms. Thirty-two years ago, come Michaelmas, the cruel French shut us up in Crevant fortress;* day by day our little company dwindled away; some slain in desperate assaults; more, slowly perishing with hunger within the walls. Oh grief! when from the battlements I saw my husband fall, pierced by the arrow of a hireling Scot! Oh greater grief! when two days later my sweet babe died! How could this distracted brain have borne that anguish but for thee,

* The Siege of Crevant, in Burgundy, took place in 1423. It was successfully defended by English and Burgundians against the French and Scotch under Marshal Severac and Lord Darnley.

my foster-child? Lovingly didst thou spread thy little arms towards me, as the good nun who had closed thy mother's eyes laid thee on this desolate breast. 'To thee, Parnel,' she said, 'God doth entrust the orphan. His mother hath even now expired; his father, Sir Waryn Holforde, is gone forth on a desperate adventure, sent by brave Chastellux to warn Earl Salisbury of our peril. Arouse thee, therefore, and take this little one to thy heart.' I obeyed, half shuddering; but thy first smile recalled me to a better mind, and the love that had been my little Gauthier's became for ever thine. Ah me, the heavy time till brave Lord Salisbury came and rescued our little band, else perishing and hunger-stricken! I dare not think of it, for my brain yet reels at the remembrance. Hence, idle musings—I'll to the distillery, for Mistress Letitia hath but small experience in that craft; and if the still be too hot, the water of pryme-roses shall all be spoilt!

Meanwhile Piers made his way to the old Knight's chamber, first pacifying Sir Roger by the promise of an interview, either with Sir Ranulph or himself, in the course of the evening. On entering the ante-room he saw Cecily

seated at a table, a folio volume with sheepskin binding and brazen clasps open before her. It was neither Dante nor Petrarch that engaged her attention now. Sir Ranulph's income not permitting him to keep a 'clerk of expenses,' that useful appendage in large families, Nicholas had been his accountant for many years. The old man had received his education in the Priory of Norton, and there acquired more knowledge of arithmetic and penmanship than many esquires of high degree could boast. But his eyes were failing now, and he had latterly been so absorbed in the care of his master as to have little time for other employment. So Cecily, knowing her grandfather's punctilious accuracy, had undertaken the accounts, and it was the 'household boke' that lay before her. She sat with the pen in one hand, and her weary head resting on the other. Nicholas stood by (she never could prevail upon him to sit down), enumerating in his monotonous voice the expenses lately incurred in the Done household—

'Of ale, iii gallons, after 2*d.* the gallon—v*jd.*

Of breid, iii dossen loafys, after vi loafys for 1*d.*—6*d.*

Of Parisch candle, two dossen, after xiii*d.* ie dossen—ii*s.*

Of salt fische, after vi*d.* the peece. . . .'

‘How is this, Nicholas?’ asked Cecily: ‘Have we so soon consumed the ‘kagg of salt eelys’ from Eccleshall, laid in at Shrovetide? It should have sufficed for the whole season of Lent.’

‘Alas! madam, it should; but truly, since Lent set in, so many have called to inquire after my master’s health, and so many grooms and serving-men have been sent by their lords on the same errand, that a double allowance of ‘pottills of beer’ and ‘peeses of salt fische’ hath been consumed. I grieve for this seeming waste, wherewith Parnel ceaseth not to flout me; but truly I thought it concerned Sir Ranulph’s honour to send none empty away.’

‘I think so too,’ replied Cecily, after a moment’s reflection. ‘Use hospitality without grudging,’ Sir Armine doth ever say. Proceed, good Nicholas.’

Then followed a list of household articles—‘wax wrought in torches,’ ditto ‘wrought in tapers,’ ginger, prones, licoras,’ &c. They had just arrived at the concluding item of ‘winter horse-meat,’ when Piers entered. The pen dropped from Cecily’s hand, and she sprang to meet him, a glow of delight overspreading her

pale face. Nicholas gathered up his folio and departed, bowing low ; and the cousins were left alone. Much had they to tell and hear ; but, ere the first greetings were over, a call from the sick room interrupted their conversation. Cecily hastened to her grandfather, and finding him bright, and refreshed with a two hours' sleep, broke to him the fact of Piers' arrival. In another moment Piers was at Sir Ranulph's feet, craving his blessing. He glanced up at the old man's face, and saw with pain the ravages sickness had made there. Sir Ranulph's cheeks had fallen in, and his eyes were sunk, and had exchanged their placid expression for one of suffering and unrest. His lips were compressed, and their outline altered ; probably by the nature of his attack, which had been what we now call paralysis. He sat upright in his chair, betraying no weakness, except by the red spot that burned on each hollow cheek when he made the exertion of speaking. His manner was calm ; and his voice perhaps a little louder than formerly ; only when he directed his speech to Cecily, an expression of deep tenderness thrilled in its tones.

'Thou art ever welcome, my son,' he said to Piers ; 'and now thrice welcome, since we

are on the eve of a hazardous journey. Be seated, for we have weighty matters to discourse of, and but little leisure. And thou, my Cecily, leave us a space; yet go not out of sight, child, for we may perchance recal thee to take part in our counsellings. Her young head,' he added, turning to Piers, 'hath more brains in it than many that are sprinkled with the frosts of age.'

Cecily blushed. 'I will return anon, dear grandfather, but must now prepare some refec-tion for my cousin; he hath ridden many hours, and scarce broken his fast.'

She went; and Sir Ranulph, bending forward, and drawing the folds of his loose robe closely round his emaciated frame, opened at once on the topic nearest his heart.

'My condition brooketh not delay,' he said; 'leechcraft availeth me nought, and this body, like a shattered tent, is ready to fall. God's will be done; His name be praised for a long life fraught with blessings. But though I have desired from my youth to serve Him and to administer justice without respect of persons, and though my honour is stainless in the eyes of men, yet, son Piers, at the bar of God I dare not plead 'Not guilty.' Fain would my spirit

turn from earthly things to seek assured peace with its Creator; but this cannot be while yonder orphans, my Richard's three poor children, remain unprovided for. Let us, then, speak of their future lot; of this world's gear they will have enough and to spare, but who, in these dark days, will be their protector?'

'Mine honoured kinsman,' replied Piers, earnestly, 'you have permitted me from early youth to look upon Cecily as my affianced wife; in weal and woe, in life and death, she is mine, and so long as God grants me life, shall need no other guardian. Her sister and her brother shall be mine also; and Heaven so deal with me as I deal with them.' Sir Ranulph was silent; and Piers added, 'You cannot doubt my faith?'

'Who could look in thy face and doubt thee, true heart, and kindly?' answered Sir Ranulph. 'But, my son, the path is beset with more thorns than do at first sight appear; one, alas, is that hereditary love which binds thee to the House of York. Already the White and Red Roses are badges of strife; and none can tell how soon a bloody quarrel may break out. Speak frankly, Piers, as to one on the edge of

the grave, to whom the feuds of princes are as the bickerings of children eager for a toy. What part art thou prepared to take in this matter?’

‘I have been strangely irresolute in my cogitations thereupon,’ replied Sir Piers; ‘and but for Cecily’s sweet sake, would fain have joined the Crusade lately assembled on the coast of Italy with intent to recover Constantinople. Now that bold scheme hath died away, there is no scope for knightly deeds abroad. At home, dear father, my spirit chafeth to see the growing misrule of the land, the griping avarice of the courtiers, insults heaped on the princely head of Richard of York, England oppressed by an ambitious woman and her favourites. Oh! I sometimes think that all these miseries and the loss of fair France besides, be punishments laid on us by the righteous Heavens for bearing an usurping sway too long.’

‘My question is answered,’ said Sir Ranulph, sadly; ‘and, Piers, I cannot blame thee, for thou hast been nurtured in these sentiments, and many of England’s best chivalry share them with thee. Oh that the voice of experience might be heard ere it is too late! Oh that the blameless life of our holy king,

the glories of his father at Agincourt, the oaths of fealty sworn to them by princes and people, might outweigh that guilty act which placed the fourth Harry on the throne ! My son, be not hasty in this quarrel ; remember that rash bloodshedding is as deep a stain on knighthood as cowardice itself.'

' I will observe thy words, father,' answered Piers, reverently. ' This night I look for a summons from the Duke of York, and to-morrow will crave thy counsel how best to obey it ; and now permit me to ask, What meaneth this sudden journey, of which the rumour reached me at Drayton ?'

' The scheme is less sudden than appears,' replied Sir Ranulph ; ' but we deemed best to keep it secret from prying or malicious ears till it was ripe for execution. The very household know not of our destination as yet. To-morrow afternoon, if God give me strength, we travel to Helegh Castle, and there repose the night. My Lord of Audeley hath invited me to do so, that we may discourse at leisure of an offer he hath made to receive Maurice into the number of his gentlemen-ushers. I much incline to accept it, for he is a man of princely spirit and unstained faith, and his household is

well and godly ordered. Should I die, he will be father and counsellor to Maurice, whose generous yet wilful spirit needeth guidance. My friend Father Armine hath, at my entreaty, written to Maurice touching this matter, and given him a command to meet me at Lichfield.

‘At Lichfield?’ asked Piers, with pleased surprise. ‘Go you so far, dear father?’

‘Further, Piers, if God permit. We shall avail ourselves of my Lord of Audeley’s escort so far as Lichfield, where he doth purpose to celebrate his Easter. We also shall tarry there for that holy season, as I desire to speak with the Bishop respecting the dispensation for your marriage.’

‘I have already done so,’ said Piers, ‘by the wise counsel of Sir Armine. Almost was I driven to despair by hearing of the desperate sickness of Pope Nicholas and the postponement of our matter; and sooth to say, the Bishop gave me little hope of redress. But a second missive from Sir Armine, urging me to apply to the new Lord Chancellor Cardinal Bouchier, cheered me greatly. I read it to the Bishop, who forthwith wrote up to my Lord Cardinal; and his answer is most favourable,

granting a free permission for our marriage, without further communication with Rome. 'The matter,' writeth his Eminence, 'shall be ordered in our own Ecclesiastical Court, nothing more being needed than the testimony of my Lord of Worcester and his chaplain,' both of whom were present when Pope Nicholas affixed his signature to the parchment. I have this under the Bishop's own hand and seal.'

'This is good news,' said Sir Ranulph, 'and removeth a weight from my spirit. Listen, Piers; at my death, Cecily, if yet unmarried, will become a ward of the Crown, and much have I feared your marriage might thus be hindered, for thy Yorkist leanings are no secret. Already our wealthy neighbour, William of Trowtbecke, Chamberlain of Chester, and by recent purchase Lord of Dunham, hath sought her hand for his eldest son. The youth himself doth press his suit with great passionateness, refusing to be gain-said; and Queen Margaret hath condescended to plead for him by letter and message. Nay, frown not, son Piers, thou hast nought to fear.'

'I doubt neither Cecily's truth nor your kindness,' replied Piers; 'but say, father, was Maurice the bearer of this message?'

'The unwilling bearer,' replied Sir Ranulph.

‘Even his blind devotion to the Queen could not make him a traitor to thy cause. He loves thee well, Piers. Heaven grant that nothing may arise to cool that love; and now it remaineth only to speak of Lettice, my right dear, though wilful child. Read this letter, for it toucheth her nearly; it is from my kinswoman the widowed Baroness of Kynderton, one of the most discreet and devout ladies in King Henry’s Court.’

Piers read as follows:—

‘Right reverend and worshipful kinsman,— I recommend me to you, heartily wishing to hear of your welfare, and thanking God for your somewhat amending of the great sickness ye have had. By the hearing thereof I was nought in heart’s ease until I heard ye were some little recovered. And because the art of leechcraft is little studied in your country, and because the soil whereon your abode is builded is cold and spumous, I pray you right earnestly, dear cousin, to come and occupy my poor house in London, so soon as your strength shall permit. It shall be vacant from Easter till Whitsuntide, while I attend on her Majesty at the Tower, or else go in her train to Coventry,

and I pray you to bring my dear goddaughter Cecily, that I may see her before her marriage, on which event may the gracious Heavens smile ; and bring Letitia also, touching whom I have now a message of grave import to deliver from the Queen. I pray you give it your best consideration, for her Majesty was not well content that her gracious intercession in behalf of the heir of Trowbecke stood him in so little stead. Nevertheless, of her royal favour to your family and to Master Maurice in especial, the Queen biddeth me offer to my kinswoman Letitia the honourable office of second rocker in the nursery of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales. There be three other rockers, young gentlewomen of good birth and breeding, which take their turns of service, and on my poor self is laid the supervision of them all. This trust I desire to fulfil diligently by the help of our Lord Jesu, to whom I must give account. Of salary, board, allowance for journeys, and other items I cannot write fully for lack of time, and also for a weakness in mine eyes, which causeth me much unease when I write. The post* tarrieth, so farewell. Written in

* Messenger.

London in right great haste, on St. Gregory's even.

‘Your faithful friend and bedeswoman,
‘ISABEL VENABLES of Kynderton.

‘I pray you ye be well dieted of meat and drink, for that will help more than potions to your healthward. Nevertheless, Leech Fynch, my medeciner, hath an excellent skill in such herbs as may warm the chilly blood of age. Dear cousin, if I dared tender advice unasked, I would say, slight not her Majesty's offer. The saints preserve you. Amen.’

It took but a few minutes to decide that the Queen's message was in fact a command not to be disregarded without incurring her displeasure. Sir Ranulph, with that restlessness which often accompanies a final break-up, caught at the idea of complete change of scene which his kinswoman's hospitable offer held out. They had been confidential friends through life, and it would be cheering to him to see her once more, and to secure her friendship for his granddaughters. Perhaps, too, Leech Fynch's cordial draughts were not without their attraction, though Sir

Ranulph was too wise and dealt too honestly with himself to indulge vain hopes of his life being much further prolonged. So it was decided that they should proceed from Lichfield to London the middle of Easter week ; and the old knight having discussed this scheme, and deputed Piers to arrange several household and farming matters for him, betook himself to rest. He could not bring himself to consent to an interview with the Vicar, the mention of whose name caused a thrill of agitation through his frame ; but he sent him a courteous message of farewell. Cecily, who had been hovering in the antechamber, now brought her grandfather's 'liverye' of spiced wine and simnel cake ; and after reciting his evening orisons, he went to sleep more calmly than he had done since his attack.

CHAPTER VI.

OF LIGHT AND DARKNESS.

There are no tricks in plain and simple faith.

SHAKESPEARE.

IT was a 'scamlyng day' in Lent; that is, a fast of peculiar strictness. No regular meals were served on those occasions; only a leather jack of ale, a manchet loaf and supply of salt fish were placed on the hall-table, and the family and servants helped themselves from time to time when the cravings of hunger grew importunate. Piers partook of this refreshment sparingly, then hastened forth to fulfil Sir Ranulph's behests. A tall, fair-complexioned peasant, whose broad chest and well-knit limbs looked the perfection of manly strength, was standing in the gateway as he passed. His head was bent, and his whole attitude one of dejection; but at the sound of Piers's voice exclaiming, 'Ah, Hal Nixon! is it thou?' he started and raised his large blue

eyes to the knight's face with a look of joyful surprise.

At the next question, 'What hath brought thee back from Halton Marches?' his look of gloom returned. With kindling eye he told his sad story, which was to this effect:—Rob's luckless prophecy had been remembered against him by the abbey reeve at Vale Royal; and while serving the King in Lancashire, Hal had received notice to quit his little farm immediately. Vainly did he hasten home to protest against this cruel decree—vainly did he beg to have the matter laid before the abbot, whom he knew to be neither harsh nor grasping. Abbot William was not expected in Cheshire for several months; being detained either in London, where he spent much of his time, or in the Isle of Man, of which he was bishop; and meanwhile the reeve and his underlings managed the abbey lands their own way. There seemed no redress; and Hal in his first burst of anger did the very thing the reeve wished. He declined a wretched hovel which was offered him instead of his farm, took advantage of the newly made law against serfdom to shake off his connexion with the abbey, sold his goods at a great loss, and with a bursting heart took leave of the

pleasant home he had prepared for Gillian. His first impulse was to seek her out and tell her his wrongs; but as he drew near the village the thought that he was now a houseless wanderer rushed over him with stunning force, and sitting down on the low churchyard-wall he covered his face with both hands. Bitter regrets, gloomy forebodings, fierce anger against the reeve, and a certain amount of self-reproach for his own rash haste, struggled together in his breast. Pride and false shame forbade his presenting him to Goodman Dale in so destitute a condition, and a wild scheme rose in his head of fleeing into Yorkshire and joining a band of outlaws already collecting there under a leader named Robin of Redesdale. He was said to be of gentle blood, and professed himself neither Yorkist nor Lancastrian, but simply the 'friend of the people' and 'champion of the oppressed.' These specious titles, and the roving life his followers led, had a certain attraction for Hal in his present mood, and blinded him to the lawless nature of their pursuits. Poor Hal! chafing under wrong, and wavering in his allegiance to God, the torrent of temptation seemed about to carry him away; but help was near. He suddenly felt a rough

head laid on his knee and a strong pressure on both shoulders. Looking up to chide, as he supposed, the faithful sheep-dog that had followed him from Vale Royal, he saw not his fourfooted friend, but poor Rob Wantwit peering into his face.

‘ Ah, Rob ! thou hast undone me ! ’ he cried ; but instantly wished the words unsaid, as he saw his brother’s face convulsed with grief.

‘ I know, I know, Hal ; but dunna flout me with it. Gillian knows too, but she is good to me still.’

Hal winced. ‘ My poor lad, I never thought thou wouldst so take it to heart,’ said he. ‘ Yet I might have guessed it, for the cricket loves not its warm hearthstone better than thou ; but faint not, Rob, we’ll be merry yet. Come with me to the north country, and we will live like lords in the good greenwood ; no more digging or delving, Rob ; no more toiling and moiling for taskmasters that snatch the hard-earned morsel out of our mouths. We will seek out thy namesake in Redesdale, lad, and be our own masters.’

‘ And bitter bad masters we shall find ourselves to be,’ answered Rob, with a sudden gleam of his sarcastic humour. ‘ Hal, they call

me Wantwit, all but Gillian—she never calls me that; but the craziest word ever I spoke is wiser than thy talk now.'

Hal stared at him in moody surprise; the poor idiot he had reared and loved, and worked for, but always looked upon as far beneath his sheep-dog in intelligence, now rose above him as counsellor and reprover. 'What can I do?' he asked gloomily, but humbly.

'The church-door is open,' muttered Rob, pointing to the south porch, which faced them. 'Go pray, Hal, go pray; say thy paternoster, and the evil ones will fly. See here,' he added, putting his hand in his brother's and drawing him round to the north side of the chancel, 'they fly, they fly!' He glanced up as he spoke at the range of grotesque, fiendlike heads carved in stone which grinned under the shadow of the roof. Some were represented gnashing their teeth, others stopping their ears; and though scarcely a century old, all looked black and weather-stained. 'They fly!' he repeated; 'they dare not hearken to the lauds and misereres within; and yet I fear them,' whispered Rob, clinging to his brother, and shaking from head to foot. 'Say thy prayers, Hal—I would I could say mine!'

‘Thou canst, my poor scholar,’ said a deep voice near them ; ‘ for God casteth away none ; the wayfarer, though a fool, shall not err in coming to Him.’

The speaker was Sir Armine, and his words calmed Rob instantly. Ever since the night of his luckless flight from Goodman Dale’s he had felt for the good priest as much love and reverence as his wild nature was capable of. Sir Armine, returning from the scene of Lancelyn’s murder, had found the boy half-buried in snow by Woodcock Well ; he had warmed him, fed him, made his peace with the goodman, and ever since instructed him day by day in religious truth. Though Rob was wild and fierce sometimes, and at others hopelessly stupid, some traces of the teaching were seen in his improved conduct, and now, with an instinctive feeling that his brother wanted help, he quietly sat down on a grave, and waited while Hal told his story to the priest. He did so fully and truly, though in fear and trembling, for he knew not what effect his quarrel with the Vale Royal monk might have on Sir Armine’s mind. It drew forth a deep sigh, but no reprimand, however ; and emboldened by this, he ventured to ask

Sir Armine's counsel as to the future. The priest, after some reflection, advised him to go to the Manor, seek an interview with Nicholas, or, if possible, with Mistress Cecily, and beg employment on the farm or woods, for a few weeks at least. Hal followed the advice instantly ; and meeting with Sir Piers, as we have seen, made his request to him.

The Knight's reply was prompt, and surpassed his utmost hopes. At the Manor, indeed, there was no vacancy ; but Sir Piers was looking out for a bailiff, active, faithful, and stalwart, to take care of his property. It struck him at once that Hal combined all these qualities, with a thorough knowledge of the 'vert,' as every green thing from an oak to a primrose was then called. He offered to give Hal a trial ; the offer was rapturously accepted ; and half-an-hour later Hal was to be seen flying on the wings of hope and joy to acquaint Gillian with his good fortune. To his credit be it spoken, he did not forget, ere he lay down on his pallet of straw that night, to thank God, who had rescued him from so great sin and peril. To Sir Armine, too, he poured forth in few but expressive words the gratitude which filled his honest heart. When he looked about

for Rob, to impart to him his good news, the lad was not to be found. He had gone out, Gillian said, an hour before, to pick primroses on the hillside for Mistress Lettice's distilling.

After dismissing Hal, the Knight addressed himself to a less pleasing duty, that of seeking the promised interview with the Vicar. He found Sir Roger at his own door, putting some fishing-tackle in order, and nervously on the watch for his arrival. He did not ask Piers to come in, but joined him on the rough grass-plot in front of the house. They stood some moments in silence, then Piers said—

‘If you have aught to impart, Sir Vicar, speak on.’

Sir Roger looked uneasily round him, then said—

‘I desire, brave Knight, to hint to you certain suspicions that I have lately found reason to entertain touching the woeful and fatal accident that befel your pursuivant, Lancelyn of Smallwoode.’

‘Have you any clue to his murderer?’ asked the Knight. ‘If so, declare it freely!’

‘Some clue I have, doubtless; but, since it was obtained under seal of confession, you

must pardon me, Sir Knight, if I seem to speak riddles.'

'The saints forbid that I should seek to violate the sanctity of confession!' replied Sir Piers; 'but, father, is it good that Holy Church should spread her wing round a wilful shedder of blood?'

Sir Roger quailed under his eye, and answered with white lips—

'It behoveth not me to dispute the decrees of the Church; but thus far let me say,—one whom I dare not name hath certain knowledge where the parchment is. He doth aver that it was not destroyed, as we fondly surmised, but is whole and uninjured, both in writing and seals.'

'Then why not restore it at once?' broke in Sir Piers; 'the scroll is mine, and can neither concern nor benefit any other man. What meaneth this shuffling and paltering?'

'You are less keen-sighted than I deemed you, worshipful Knight,' said the Vicar, with a sneer. 'In plain words, he who, through me, would treat with you, well knoweth that the parchment, though to him valueless, is beyond price to you; he is a needy caitiff, and will not give it up for less than fourscore gold nobles.'

He scanned the Knight's face, and seeing it darken, added, falteringly, 'Perchance three-score might content him.'

'Is this, Sir Priest, the communication you have to make?' asked Sir Piers, with a look of deep scorn. 'Do you bid me bribe a thief and a murderer to give me back mine own? Fie, fie! Sir Vicar. Tell him who sent you, whoever he may be, that I cannot consent to treat with one so base.'

He turned away, merely bending his head in token of farewell. Sir Roger followed, and laid a hand familiarly on his arm:—

'And your marriage, Sir Piers? think once more! nay, I would befriend you in spite of yourself. The sign manual of the Pope cannot be replaced for many months; Sir Ranulph is sinking; when he dies his granddaughters become wards of the Crown; over such Queen Margaret hath a watchful eye, and many a plighted damsel hath she released from her troth, and compelled to wed some great lord of the Court. Bethink you! fourscore nobles were cheaply spent to save all this.'

Sir Piers shook off the hand that grasped his sleeve. The insolent allusion to his engagement with Cecily was almost more than he

could bear ; but he struggled hard for self-control.

‘ I thank you, Sir Vicar,’ he replied, ‘ but matters stand not with us as you suppose. The scroll you have spoken of is no longer needful towards our marriage ; and I had no motive in seeking to recover it save that of rescuing the signature of his Holiness from unworthy hands.’

Sir Roger stood like one transfixed ; a look of rage and baffled cunning distorted his features for a moment ; but he composed himself, and said, bowing low—

‘ I will report your words to him who sent me.’

‘ False babbler,’ thought Sir Piers, as he turned to go home ; ‘ I am much deceived if thou art not thine own ambassador. I burn to tell thee so to thy face ; but, for my Cecily’s sake, must be patient ; she will have enemies enough, poor darling, without provoking thy malice.’

With this soliloquy, and a half-smile at his own new-born virtue of prudence, he put away the hateful and perplexing subject from his thoughts. The sun was now setting, and glowed like a bar of red-hot iron through the leafless trees. It was reflected in the still and

limpid mere beside which Piers took his homeward way. Battered and worn by years of martial strife, he drank in each peaceful sound with a delight we dwellers in 'quiet resting-places' can scarcely conceive. The cry of the waterfowl among the reeds, the noisy debates of a colony of rooks overhead, the lowing of kine that 'wound slowly o'er the lea,' were music to his ear. And oh! how sweet the voice of Cecily as, meeting him in the hall, she invited him to go with her to the distillery.

'My grandfather sleepeth, guarded by Nicholas; my Lettice is wearying to see you, cousin, and thrice hath escaped from her household tasks in a vain search after you; but Parnel, who like the giant of yore, beareth the world on her shoulders to-night, quickly recalled the truant. It is the critical moment for the primrose-water, she doth aver, and Lettice must perforce watch by the still another hour; come, then, and beguile the weary time for her.'

They found Lettice at her post, hot and flushed, and wrapped in a cloud of steam, which diffused a faint sweetness through the vaulted apartment. Several maidens were busy around her; some picking the flowers from their stalks; others, bringing in fresh water for the

still. They were chanting a ditty, of which some traces are still to be found in Cheshire, sung by village-children at their play. It ran thus:—

Draw, draw,
Fill a pail of water
For my lady's daughter!
One, a rush, two, a rush,
Lady bright, come under my bush!
Cowslips and tansy,
Marygold and pansy;
Of all the herbs in Paradise
The meetest for our lady!

The song ceased on Sir Piers' entrance, and Lettice sprang to greet him, with open arms; but the glee of the moment could not banish from her features the traces of anxiety and distress, and Piers was moved to see how much of their roundness and childish brightness was gone. The brightness might indeed return, but not fully; for, whatever may be said to the contrary, care sits more heavily on the very young than on the old. It is more startling; its dark shadow is in stronger contrast with their usual sunshiny mood; it finds them less chastened, less thoroughly provided with the 'patience which worketh experience,' and the 'experience which worketh hope.' Lettice had been much agitated by the contents of the Lady

of Kynderton's letter. She was both shy and reserved; and the idea of parting with Cecily, and being launched into a Court, even though Maurice might be there, was positive suffering to her. Nor could she bear the thought of leaving her country home, which she loved passionately, every bird and beast, each herb in the meadows, each woodland nest, being familiar and dear to her, and, as it were, under her special guardianship. So the morrow's journey had hitherto been regarded by her with more fear than satisfaction; but a little talk with Sir Piers brightened her view of the matter, and the prospect of visiting Helegh and Lichfield, and possibly inspecting the Halsteds, Cecily's future home, soon became pleasantly prominent in her mind. They conversed cheerily for awhile, while Cecily took the management of the still. Then Parnel's voice was heard in the low-arched passage, saying—

‘Back, froward urchin, back! must thou needs intrude thyself amongst the maidens? Primroses, forsooth! as if none could be trusted to deliver a bunch of primroses to Mistress Cecily but thou! Here, give them to me, and go to Nicholas in the buttery for thy groat; I will not gainsay that thou hast earned it, for fairer blossoms I never saw; they be glossy

and smooth as silk, and sweet as the breath of May. What! dost thou still withhold them, peevish varlet? Nay, then, begone, and take thy posy with thee.'

Cecily and Lettice both sprang to the rescue. They found Rob (for Rob it was) standing as if rooted to the ground, eyeing Parnel with a dogged composure which astonished that majestic personage. With the strange fidelity often displayed by idiots, he would give up his trust to none but the person for whom it was intended. He edged away from Lettice, though she was usually his favourite, but clutched at Cecily's skirt, and thrust the flowers into her hand, muttering—

'A token! a token for yonder gallant!'

He glanced towards Lettice, laid his finger on his lips, then shuffled away, not even stopping to claim the well-earned groat from Nicholas.

Cecily understood Rob's meaning, for she had heard from Piers of his interview with Bracy. Not without grief and apprehension did she receive the token. She stood silently regarding the flowers, and exploring with her taper fingers amongst their cool soft stalks and leaves of emerald velvet. When at last she detected a letter rolled round into the smallest

possible compass, she shrank as if an adder had suddenly bitten her.

‘My Lettice must not know of this,’ she murmured, placing the letter unperceived in her cousin’s hand. A second pang as keen as the first, shot through her, for never before had she practised the least concealment from her sister. Now she felt that events might arise, nay, were arising, which might excite in them opposite wishes, opposite hopes and fears, and she trembled to think of Lettice’s eager, uncontrollable impulses set in array against her own calm, but steadfast convictions. Oh terrible fear of coming evil, only to be stilled by heartfelt trust in God! Softly she whispered the divine prayer, so exquisitely rendered by Dante—

‘O Padre nostro, che nei cieli stai,

 Venga ver noi la pace del tuo regno;
 Che noi ad essa non potem venire
 S’ella non vien, con tutto il nostro ingegno.’ *

* O Thou our Father, who dost dwell in heaven,

 O may to us thy kingdom’s peace arrive;
 For if not sent by Thee to man below,
 With all our efforts fruitlessly we strive.

WRIGHT’S *Dante*.

Twilight had gathered in, and the work of the day was over. The sisters left the distillery, their arms twined round each other's waists. Lettice gladly obeyed Cecily's injunction to go to rest at once; so they parted at the foot of the cockle-stair. Their words were few; but Cecily's kiss was more fervent than usual, and Lettice was surprised to feel a silent tear drop on her forehead.

Meanwhile Sir Piers repaired to the deserted hall, and perused by the red firelight his dispatch from Wigmore Castle. It was on fine Flemish paper, tied round with floss silk, the ends of which were secured with red wax and sealed with the Duke of York's own signet, 'having' the arms of France and England quarterly. It had evidently been dictated by the Duke, and the superscription, 'To our right trusty and well beloved Piers Holforde, Knight'—'The Duc of York' was in his own hand. It ran thus, in the regal style Richard Plantagenet had lately assumed:—

'Right trusty and beloved, we greet you heartily well. Knowing your benevolence and tender love to us and ours, we doubt not you shall have been disquieted at the hearing of

the great and crying indignities offered to us by her who governeth, or rather who misgoverneth, this realm.

‘The miseries of our poor country, and the sundry and subtle plots laid against our life, do compel us to that from the which we have hitherto shrunk. If blood be shed in this quarrel, the guilt rest with those who have forced us to unsheathe the sword. We are free before God and man.

‘We, well knowing your zeal and earnest loyalty towards us, and that they be in such measure as rather to need the bridle than the spur, hearing likewise through the Earl of Worcester of your hope of a speedy union with Mistress Cecilia Done and of the dangerous sickness of her and your reverend kinsman, do specially charge you not to postpone these matters, nor to jeopardize your happiness and that of a fair and virtuous lady, by your zeal on our behalf. We charge you, on pain of our displeasure, not to come to us at Wigmore, but to give us the meeting in London, where, God speeding us, we hope to celebrate Holy Cross Day.*

* May 3rd.

‘Meanwhile, that you be not idle in our behalf, we put full trust in you to sound such gentlemen as adhere to our good cause in Stafford and the neighbouring shire, and we beseech you keep them in remembrance of their duty to this unhappy realm, now drifting like a rudderless ship towards the rocks of perdition.

‘And so the blessed Saints have you and yours in their keeping.

‘Given under our signet, at our Castle of Wigmore.

‘Haste and secrecy.’

‘March 22, 1455.’

This epistle was prompted by real kindness and generosity on the part of the princely writer; but the soundest policy could not have devised words more calculated to bind to him a chivalrous spirit like that of Piers. With a silent but fervent vow of loyalty to his cause, the Knight rose. His first thought was to seek out Cecily, but a second and more prudent impulse drew him back. Returning to the hearth, he once more unfolded the Duke’s letter, read it with deep attention, then let it drop amongst the glowing embers. A quick

flame shot up from it, and flashed and flickered on the sword and steel corslet of Richard Done, which hung from a pillar opposite. In a moment the gleam died away, leaving all around in deeper twilight than before.

CHAPTER VII.

OF THE LORD OF AUDELEY AND HIS GUESTS.

He that is truly dedicate to war
 Hath no self-love
 True nobility is exempt from fear.

SHAKSPEARE.

A GLEAM of April sunshine was resting on the Manor House when the Done household took their departure the next morning. Sir Ranulph, wrapped in furs, and propped up with cushions, was placed in the family 'whirligig,' a kind of car, then much used in journeys. It was protected by a strong awning, and drawn by a pair of stout roan horses. Cecily and old Parnel travelled with the invalid, while Lettice and her cousin rode alongside of them, diverging now and then for the sake of a canter on the greensward, or to fly the favourite hawk that accompanied Lettice wherever she went. Several retainers of the Dones followed, and with them Gralam, young Hamo, and Sir Piers' new follower, Hal Nixon. They led

several spare horses, and to Hamo was allotted the office of leading Mistress Cecily's beautiful grey palfrey, an office he took no little pride and delight in. The procession moved slowly, keeping in the rear of the heavily-laden carts; and so after a mile or two, they bade farewell to Cheshire.

We might dwell on many little circumstances in that farewell that were very touching. And had we time to pause, we would gladly do so, for whatever extends our sympathies is good. If we merely read the barren and general history, even of our own countrymen, four hundred years ago, we seldom get beyond dry dates and facts; and their most tremendous struggles scarcely affect us more than the fabled battles of the 'kites and crows.' The crimes these struggles led to are blazoned forth, but of the amount of courage, patience, and self-devotion they must have brought into play, we hear nothing; and therefore is it good to lift the veil and obtain a glimpse of their domestic life and gentler feelings.

I can but tell you briefly how Gillian wept as she offered a parting nosegay of sweet herbs to Mistress Cecily, and how the village children ran before the whirlicote, and picked every

rough stone from under its wheels ; also how the procession paused at the church-door, and Sir Ranulph walked with a firm step to the Done chantry and knelt once more amongst the tombs of his ancestors. The chantry priest and choir were already there, and as he slowly departed, leaning on Sir Piers Holforde, they intoned the Litany used on behalf of travellers.

‘Thou who didst guide Thy people by an angel,
The wise men by a star,
Be near Thy servant, and dispose his way ;
Be in storms his Haven, in weariness his Rest ;
Go with him, lead him out, and bring him back.’

As the last words were chanted the aged knight shook his head, but not altogether sadly. Something he murmured to Cecily of a ‘house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens,’ then resumed his place in the carriage. But first he doffed his cap to the villagers who formed a line on either side of the church steps. They ‘louted low’ in return, then broke into groups, and went home.

‘The knight’s sore ailing,’ croaked Gammer Bettiley to her neighbours. ‘There’s a pinched look in his face bodes no good.’

‘Think you so ill of his state?’ sighed Gillian Dale. ‘He is indeed wondrously

changed, and by reason of his great age one cannot but fear the worst.'

'His great age, say you? Marry come up! and what age dost thou take him to be, Maid Gillian? I'll tell thee, threescore and ten is his age, and no more; and I ought to know, for my mother oft told me I was born the same year. A year it was of ban and not of benison, for maist all the cattle died of murrain, and rye and barley were so scarce men were fain to dig fern-roots and grind them for flour.* Well, Sir Ranulph was born that year at the Manor House, and much I marvel he stays not at the Manor House to die.'

'Alack, poor gentleman!' Gillian exclaimed, 'the good Saint Nicholas rather speed him on his journey, and send him better health in those foreign parts.'

'Small chance of that,' persisted the Gammer, in her Cestrian zeal. 'What country is so little infected with sickness and disease as this of ours?† My gaffer's mother was a Flemish woman, one of those loomsters Queen Phylippa brought to Manchester to teach the mystery

* The year 1385.

† See ORMEROD'S *History of Cheshire*, vol. i. p. 102.

of weaving. She used to marvel at the great age we attain to hereabouts, old men dandling their great-grandchildren on their knees. 'No need of mediciners in this country,' she used to cry, 'for they be nothing so much resorted to here as elsewhere. When a man is sick, the goodwife tieth a kerchief round his head, and maketh him a posset, and if that will not amend him, then Heaven be merciful to him!' Oh! 'tis a marvellous good country to live in, this of our'n.'

While the Gammer discoursed thus lengthily, Gillian may be pardoned if she allowed her thoughts to wander after the travellers. We too will follow them as they toil up the steep ascent leading to the hamlet of Talk-o'-the-Hill, in Staffordshire. One last look from that high eminence on the Vale of Cheshire, then they wind down a precipitous bank till they disappear in the Talk Hollows, a little valley yellow with thousands of primroses. By and by the chancel of Audeley Church comes in sight, with its high gable and pinnacles of stone, and glorious seven-light east window. A small but strong keep belonging to the Lord of Audeley stands over against the church, and under its wing nestle several rural dwellings. With these exceptions the place is green and solitary.

Several Audeley retainers, with the 'Tuchet swan' embroidered on their red jackets, were lounging near the keep, and informed our travellers that the Baron himself with a goodly company was taking the pastime of the chase not far off. Accordingly, ere they had proceeded another mile, they heard the notes of a bugle sounding from Knowle Bank, an eminence in front of them. They reached it after a toilsome ascent, enlivened by the sound of voices and the sight of many figures moving amongst the clumps of trees that dotted the bank. An animated scene now presented itself to their eyes.

On an open platform carpeted with close turf stood a group of sportsmen, and more were flocking in from every side. The hare, after innumerable doublings and windings, had just been pulled down by her pursuers, greyhounds of rare beauty and agility. They stood panting and breathless round their victim, and near them was a group of foresters and huntsmen, waiting the Baron's further orders. The Baron who, in spite of his sixty-five years, and half that number of French campaigns, was as keen a sportsman as ever, was already on the spot, and with him his son-

in-law Sir Thomas Dutton, and several younger gentlemen. John Dutton, our foppish acquaintance, was not far behind, 'bestriding,' as Hamo remarked to Gralam, 'a right good and lusty steed.' He escorted a bevy of bright-eyed graceful girls, three of them daughters of Sir Thomas Dutton, and varying in age from eighteen to fifteen. But his conversation was chiefly directed to a maiden who accompanied them, mounted on a milk-white palfrey, which she managed with peculiar grace. Her dress was exceedingly rich and costly, yet not gaudy; it was in form not unlike a lady's riding-habit now, the material the finest cloth, with tight-fitting sleeves, over which she wore hanging ones of white lawn edged with Flemish lace. Her collar was of rich lace also, her girdle set with precious stones. Her long, shining, black hair fell, according to the fashion of the day, perfectly straight over her shoulders, and was surmounted by a little cap of crimson velvet, the border curiously embroidered with a wreath of trouts in pearls and silver. This peculiarity pointed her out as the daughter of Sir William Trowtbecke, Chamberlain of Chester, and one of the most influential gentlemen in Cheshire. By her side hung a quiver full of arrows, and a

dainty little page of Moorish extraction followed with her bow.

Beauty, that marvellous power for good or evil, Eglanbie Trowtbecke was richly endowed with, beauty not of feature and colouring only, but of expression also, when from time to time a smile played round her lips, and gleamed from her dark lustrous eyes. She seemed formed to take the lead wherever she went, and her fair young companions never so much as thought of disputing her girlish sway. How indeed could they vie in knowledge of the world with one who, besides a year's experience of Queen Margaret's court, had crossed the sea, witnessed a great tournament at Bruges, and excited, it was said, the admiring notice of Duke Philip of Burgundy and his nobles. This last fact, if such it was, they had not learned from Eglanbie, for vanity was no leading feature in her character. It had been imparted confidentially by her brother, now staying at Helegh, to the Lady of Dutton; and by the Lady of Dutton confidentially repeated to her brother-in-law John; and by him added to the stock of courtly anecdote and gossip which it was his chief occupation to collect and retail.

Several young gentlemen now rode up ; amongst them young Adam de Trowtbecke, distinguished like his sister for personal beauty and richness of apparel. Of the whole group, indeed, there were but two or three whose dress did not betoken a scrupulous regard to the last fashion. As we have said before, love of dress was the ruling folly of that age, extending to all classes, and carried to such a pitch that Parliament actually condescended to record a censure of it.

A historian of the day reproaches the young men with ‘suffering their long hair to hide the foreheads on which the Cross had been signed at baptism.’ The poet Occleve ridiculed the long-sleeved mantles then in vogue in these words :—

Now hath this land little need of broomes
To sweep the filth away from the streete,
Sin side sleeves of penniless groomes
Will it uplicke, be it dry or weete.

Perhaps the only person in the present company thoroughly free from this weakness was the Lord of Audeley himself. He wore a dark surcoat, under which gleamed the light steel corslet he seldom or never put off. A velvet cap with one rich jewel in front covered

his stately head. He had dismounted, and laying the bridle over his arm, walked to the top of a green knoll hard by. There taking off his cap, he stood for a few moments inhaling the fresh riotous breeze which had more of March than April in its touch. His elastic step, spare but vigorous frame, and clear complexion, showed that a life of toil had rather braced than exhausted him. Some threads of silver mingled with his dark hair, thick and curling, except at the temples, which the constant pressure of the helmet had bared. His speaking eye betokened a temper easily moved to mirth, to sadness, or perchance to wrath; but in every phase, noble and truthful, kindly too, for there was something most winning in his voice and smile, a simplicity and forgetfulness of self, softening down the habitual sense of power.

The Baron of Audeley did indeed possess all but unbounded power in this part of England. The Tuchet family, to which he belonged, had settled in Cheshire at the Norman Conquest. William Tuchet, its head, in the days of Edward I., had distinguished himself in the wars of France and Scotland, and been summoned to Parliament as a Baron about the

year 1306. Another Tuchet gained much renown in France under the Black Prince, and fell in a bloody fight with the Spaniards at Rochelle. He had married Joane, daughter, and eventually heiress, of Lord Audeley, the renowned warrior of Poitiers; and by this union Helegh Castle and a very large property in Staffordshire were added to the Tuchet possessions.

The present Baron was his grandson, and had begun his career by fighting gallantly under Henry V. in France; thus adding the lustre of personal prowess to that with which the deeds of his ancestors invested him. He hated faction, and knew little of statecraft, and therefore seldom visited the Court, though much beloved and trusted there. It suited him better to 'dwell among his own people;' and this he did chiefly at Helegh Castle, in almost princely splendour and hospitality, whereby he endeared himself much to the gentry and peasantry both of Staffordshire and Cheshire. And now that civil strife was beginning, he kept down with an iron hand those outbreaks of lawlessness which made other parts of England scarcely habitable. Entire devotion to the House of Lancaster, and to the glorious memory of Henry V., were

ruling feelings in his mind ; and his loyalty was of that noble, unflinching order which in modern days prompted the Vendean war-cry ‘Vive le Roi, quand même.’

‘We course no more to-day, Simon,’ said Lord Audeley to the forester who stood waiting his orders. After bestowing some kind words and caresses on the beautiful greyhounds which looked up to him with almost human affection in their eyes, he turned to his guests. ‘It is a nimble and a pleasant breeze,’ he remarked, ‘that bloweth athwart this high eminence ; its wings have been dipped in the salt waves that wash the coast of Wales.’

‘Methinks it hath tarried on its way,’ said John Dutton, shivering, ‘to kiss those icy peaks of Snowdon, which I see glittering on the furthest horizon.’

‘Ah, John,’ replied the Baron, laughing, ‘that skimp just-au-corps and those silk hosen of thine are meant for lady’s bower, not for brake and brier and wild moorland. See, fair Eglanbie, how far the prospect stretches around ; here is the plain of Cheshire ; here the stronghold of Beeston, which my forefather wrested from the rebellious Simon of Montfort. See yonder, on the green flat, Breyddn Hill,

like a lion couchant, guarding the Marches of Wales; its snowy outline shows well against the dark clouds behind.'

'Those clouds do foretel a storm gathering from that quarter,' observed the heir of Trowtbecke; 'I hear from Powis Castle that men from Oswestry, Shrewsbury, and the heart of Wales are flocking to Wigmore, some harnessed, some unarmed; and these last be furnished there with bills, bows, or halberts, according to their capacity. What meaneth this? surely something more than mere defence.'

'If it mean treason it shall be quickly crushed, I trow,' interposed the Baron, with knitted brows.

He was silent; and one of the guests remarked—

'There were strange stories afloat when I was at Weymouth lately; a bird of great size and marvellous plumage was seen by the crew of a caravel near the Isle of Portland. Thrice he rose from the waves, and crowed hoarsely and dismally, turning himself to the north, south, and west; they who heard him boded no good to England from his note.'

The listeners received this narrative in grave silence; for that was an age when portents were

readily believed. Presently Eglanbie Trowtbecke rejoined—

‘That story hath obtained wide credence, even in the Palace of Shene; so hath another to the effect that a deep river, somewhere in the north, was seen to divide itself suddenly, the bottom remaining dry. This is interpreted to mean a falling away from the King, presently to be looked for. These tales have been reported to my royal Mistress, and blanched her cheek with fear.’

‘Yours, bright donzell,’ said John Dutton, ‘remaineth unchanged, true to the Rose of Lancaster.’

‘I fear not portents,’ she answered, with a slight curl of the lip; ‘our own fears do oftenest make their own fulfilment.’

She started, nevertheless, as the deep croak of a raven was heard at no great distance. In that day this bird was universally considered to be one of evil augury, and the various changes in his note, and the direction of his flight, were noticed with superstitious awe. His ominous cry just then seemed an echo of the gloomy forebodings the party had been indulging in; so when he rose from the gnarled oak in which he had been perched, and

prepared for flight, the eyes of all were riveted upon him.

‘Pray Heaven he fly to the right,’ whispered young Elinour Dutton to her brother.

‘’Tis but a corbie, fond child,’ replied the boy; but he spoke under his breath, and when, after trimming its feathers and making a few short gyrations, the raven took wing towards the setting sun, a blank silence pervaded the group. Only for a moment, however; the next, an arrow whistled through the air, and the bird fell heavily and without a sound into a hollow glen, fifty yards from where they stood.

‘Your pardon, my lord,’ said Eglanbie, in a deprecating voice, to the Baron, as she unstrung her bow and returned it to the page.

‘So perish good King Harry’s foes,’ replied Lord Audeley with a smile. ‘Thou hast a firm hand and true eye, maiden—ay, and a stout heart too.’

They mounted their horses and separated, the greater part returning towards Helegh; a few only accompanying the Baron, who rode Cheshire-wards to meet Sir Ranulph. Eglanbie and her brother, after some conference together, were about to join the latter party, when Lord Audeley interfered. He had heard something

of Adam de Trowtbecke's suit for Cecily, and to save her embarrassment, had done violence to his own hospitable feelings by limiting the young gentleman's visit to that day.

'Fair sir,' he said, 'I am glad our paths have so far lain together, and that our poor sport hath rather helped than hindered your journey to Stafford; but the sun is now sinking apace, and we must no longer detain you. You may trust your sister with all confidence to the care of my daughter Dutton, who shall herself visit the Court shortly, and restore Mistress Eglanbie to the charge of the Baroness of Kynderton. And now I bid you heartily farewell, and pray you commend me to your host Sir Louis Clifford.'

With lowering brow, Adam de Trowtbecke summoned his followers and prepared to depart.

'Eglanbie,' he said to his sister, 'stand my friend if thou canst; set thy wits to work (for they be sharp and keen), and obtain for me at least a few moments' speech with Cecily. I will linger hereabouts till nightfall.'

'This is mere madness,' she replied; 'and much I marvel, brother, thou shouldst abase thyself to sue to one who cares not for thee. If the Queen's intercession availed nought, how

should mine prosper? and knowest thou not, besides, that Cecily Done hath from childhood been promised to Sir Ranulph's ward, the Knight of Holforde?’

‘That such is Sir Ranulph's will, I know; but that her heart ever ratified that promise I know not, nor will believe, except from her own peerless lips. The marriage is hindered by their cousinship; Sir Piers hath been absent many years, and is, they tell me, of too stern mould to please a maiden's fancy; her grandfather is dying: all these things bid me hope, if only delay can be procured.’

She replied merely by touching his arm. Looking round he saw a carriage emerging from among the trees, and Lord Audeley spurring forward to greet its occupants. Cecily dismounted to meet him, and Lettice rode up, escorted by a gentleman whom the brother and sister at once knew by his cognizance to be Sir Piers. Eglanbie shook her head as she marked his knightly bearing and fine countenance. She felt at once, though her brother did not, that these were attractions infinitely greater than the studied fopperies and affected grimace of the young court gallants. Nor was there any carelessness as to externals in the knight's ap-

pearance ; his corslet was curiously wrought, and polished as a mirror, and the murrey-coloured, or deep-red, surcoat which partly covered it, set off his pale but expressive features to advantage. They beamed with pleasure as he returned the cordial clasp of Lord Audeley's hand. The Baron, after expressing unfeigned satisfaction at meeting him thus unawares, added a pressing invitation to Helegh, which, however, Piers steadily declined.

'Thus far,' he said, 'have I ridden with the intent to protect my kinsfolk on their journey ; in your safe keeping, my lord, I leave them without disquietude. We shall meet again in brief space.'

He proceeded on his way, hazarding but one farewell glance at Cecily.

'Surely,' thought Eglanbie, 'that answering smile of hers should cure my brainsick brother of his vain hopes.'

She turned towards him to express the thought ; but seeing in his compressed lips and flashing eye the well-known symptoms of rising passion, she restrained her speech. He read the half-taunt in her face, and putting spurs to his horse, rode away, beckoning to his servants to follow him.

It was not without pain that Sir Piers had refused the offered hospitality of Lord Audeley. The gates of Helegh had been open to him from boyhood, and now, after many adventurous years passed abroad, he yearned to revisit a place endeared to him by early associations. Its commanding site, vast extent, and great strength had left an indelible impression on his mind. Moreover, he loved its noble master well. To him he traced his childish longings for martial fame; he had been his earliest model of chivalry, truth, self-denial, and he revered him still as the mirror of all these virtues. It was pleasant to feel that he retained the Baron's regard, and the time, he fondly hoped, might soon come when their intercourse would be as free and cordial as ever. But at the present moment it could not be so. Sir Piers, almost a stranger amongst his early friends, had had no opportunity of avowing his political sentiments. He would not obtrude that avowal, far less shrink from it; but he felt himself too deeply pledged to the House of York to be able honourably to intrude into the domestic circle of a determined Lancastrian. Among the group that surrounded Lord Audeley, Piers recognised

Egertons,* Moretons, Venables, Duttons, all enthusiastically devoted to the Red Rose. Could he either bring strife and discussion into that united band, or keep silence if Richard of York were spoken of bitterly? No, it was best for him to keep aloof till happier times. So, leaving Helegh, with her crown of towers, to the right, he took his solitary way towards Lichfield. The distance was about four-and-twenty miles; but he determined to break the journey by sleeping at Raunton Abbey, scarcely ten from where he now was.

Leaving the woodland tract, Piers entered upon a pleasant open country, formed of gentle undulations and low limestone hills covered with short grass. A thin smoke, rising between hillocks, showed the position of Newcastle-under-Lyme. As he advanced southward, the landscape grew more dreary. Here and there peasants were to be seen digging for fuel in the peaty soil. To the left he skirted a few scattered villages occupied by

* 'And Egerton the strength of Egerton did try.'

DRAYTON'S *Polyolbion*.

In the miserable wars of this period Egertons, divided among themselves, fought some on the Yorkist, and some on the Lancastrian side.

pottery, who manufactured the clays of the district into coarse earthenware. So humble was the origin of these potteries, which now traffic with every quarter of the globe; so solitary, four hundred years ago, the district now converted into a chain of populous towns, with 'dusky lane and wrangling mart,' and the volcano-like glare of a hundred furnaces, turning night into day!

Higher and higher the ground rose, till our little party reached Ashley Heath, said to be the most elevated table-land in England. The sun was setting behind a mass of dark clouds, as they galloped across its bleak level. A keen blast blew from the west, and sighed through withered bents and tufts of heather and whortleberry. It died away, however, as they began to descend to more sheltered and cultivated ground. Soon a distant glimmer at their feet, like the wandering lights in a morass, showed the whereabouts of Eccleshall, the stronghold of the Bishops of Lichfield, with its brimming moat and network of ditches. Spurring on, by reason of the darkness which gathered amain, they reached the little river Sow, a feeder of the Trent. They soon found a fordable place, and were about to cross its

sluggish stream, when they heard voices and the tread of horses' feet coming up at full speed.

The party consisted of a young gentleman, unknown to Piers, but recognised by us as Adam de Trowtbecke. Five serving-men rode after, and one alongside of him, mounted on a very powerful horse, and holding on the saddle before him a peasant with a lantern in his hand. A violent altercation was going on between these two; the peasant struggling to get free, and uttering 'curses, not loud but deep,' the retainer laughing at his captive's impotent rage.

'Insolent cub,' he said, as they reached the bank; 'hadst thou lent us thy light willingly, a goat, or perchance a demi-mutton, should have been thine, for my master is bounteous and free; but now thy churlish service earns thee neither thanks nor guerdon. Sit straight, I say, and hold up thy torch, or this tuck-stick shall prick thee into better manners.'

A fresh struggle was the peasant's only reply. The other serving-men laughed boisterously, unchecked by their master, who, like themselves, had been drinking deep at the hostel in Eccleshall. They all plunged into

the stream, shouting ' a Trowtbecke ! a Trowtbecke !'

Sir Piers, who was crossing the river before them, looked back at the sound of that name, and his eyes met those of his rival, who started as if he had encountered a ghost. Recovering himself, however, and spurring forward, he called out, insolently—

' Give place, Sir Knight, give place ; hinder not me and mine from landing—the ford is ours as much as yours !'

' You shall have room enough, young gentleman,' replied Sir Piers, courteously ; ' but look to your serving-man, yonder boor is playing him a shrewd turn.'

In fact, the cunning peasant had not watched in vain for an opportunity of revenging himself. Seeing his tormentor thrown off his guard by the sudden vision of Sir Piers Holforde, he had violently seized and jerked the left rein, so as to bring the animal into the part of the river where the current was strongest. The horse was out of his depth in a moment, and his rider unseated. The peasant meanwhile grasped at a bough overhead, and so escaped into the neighbouring thicket, bearing his lantern with him. The feat was sooner done than related,

but the confusion it created was beyond description, and much added to by the sudden darkness in which they had been left.

Sir Piers, accustomed to night-marches and watchings, soon recovered his coolness. The first object he could distinctly make out was the unhorsed serving-man, who, being heavily accoutred, and moreover as great a coward as bully, was on the point of sinking. Another moment and the 'three trouts fretted in triangle proper,' embroidered on his surcoat, would have returned to their native element; but the knight came to the rescue.

'Braggart though he be, the fellow must not drown,' he said; so, dashing by young Trowtbecke, he seized the sinking man, and with Gralam's help brought him safe to land.

The smothered cheer which this kindly deed drew from all the lookers-on reached young Trowtbecke's ear, but not his brain.

'One draught too much,' Shakspeare says, 'makes a man a fool; a second makes him mad;' and in this latter state the gallant's recent carouse had plunged him.

'To horse, my men!' he cried; 'to horse, and away! Stay not to dally with the fast friend of perjured York!'

‘ ‘Perjured!’ sayest thou,’ asked Sir Piers, his sword flashing from its sheath. ‘Say the word again, rash boy, and die.’

A fierce growl from Gralam seconded the threat; and Hamo, with unsheathed rapier, stood eager to back his lord’s quarrel, and nothing daunted by the odds against them. Hal Nixon had gone to seek a light from a hovel close by, and quickly returned, bearing a blazing pine-branch in his hand. Its red light streamed far and wide, and lit up the wild scene and wilder faces, flushed or pale with excitement. The heir of Trowtbecke had now reached the water’s edge, and with one bound his gallant steed sprang to the top of the bank. Seeing Sir Piers on foot, he dismounted, and rushed at him, sword in hand, but with unsteady arm and reeling brain. Sir Piers warded off the blow with as much ease as if the assault had been the first essay of a stripling page. With equal ease he wrested from its owner the weapon so unworthily used.

‘This is no fair quarrel,’ he said; ‘belted knights do not fight with madmen.’

Then beckoning to a grey-haired servant, whose bent head and glowing face showed him to be thoroughly ashamed of this unseemly

broil, Sir Piers placed the sword in his hands.

‘Return this to thy master,’ he said, ‘when he shall be more fit to handle it.’

The retainer stammered out some excuse for his lord.

‘He is young and hot, Sir Knight, and something hath sore chafed him to-day; at Eccles-hall, even now, he would not taste bread, but drained the stoup of wine at one draught.’

‘Thou art a good fellow,’ answered Sir Piers. ‘Think not I am one to put a hard construction on the outbreaks of heady youth; but forasmuch as Adam de Trowtbecke hath spoken slightingly of the Duke of York, the warrior who buckled on my spurs, it is my bounden duty to defend his honour. Bid thy master, therefore, meet me on Easter Monday at Lichfield; he shall hear from me further before that day.’

Sir Piers and his retinue now resumed their journey with no other light than that of the countless stars overhead. In less than an hour they saw before them the outline of Raunton Abbey, standing out dark and still against the moonless sky. Its drawbridge was soon reached, and at the first blast of Hamo’s bugle a lay-

brother looked out, and readily promised hospitality to man and beast. There were temporary sheds and stables outside the moat for men and horses, but Sir Piers was ushered at once into the monastery. Learning that the abbot and monks were in the chapel, he desired to be led there; and from behind a screen of carved oak joined in the conclusion of the compline service. It was performed with more care and at greater length than common, and the attendance of monks was unusually full. Their faces and attitudes would have made a good study for a painter. All were habited in the garb of their order, as Canons Regular of St. Augustin. It consisted of a white alb reaching down to the feet; an amice, white also, upon the shoulders; and over that a long black mantle with a hood attached to it. Their faces exhibited many varieties of expression: one or two appeared altogether wrapped in prayer and praise; some few bore in their features that indescribable look of peace which the habit of self-denial produces; others, again, looked listless and weary; and a fourth class had visibly stamped on their countenances the hateful impress of a sensual and grovelling mind.

The Abbot belonged to none of these classes

exactly. He was a man of good family and refined tastes, more curious about secular than ecclesiastical studies, and glad to pursue them unmolested in the shadow of the cloister. In the stall to his right Sir Piers observed the kneeling figure of a stranger, evidently a guest at the abbey, and from his garb and the number of priests grouped round him, a bishop. The most indifferent person could not but be struck with the meek sadness visible on his face; and it riveted Piers' attention the more because he was sure he had seen that face before.

Compline was soon over; and the knight was about to retire to the cell prepared for him when a second lay-brother accosted him, bringing a request from the Abbot that he would partake of his poor fare in the refectory. He willingly complied; and after exchanging greetings with the Abbot, was by him presented to his guest Reginald Pecock, Bishop of Chichester. With the name a flood of light broke on Piers' mind. It carried him back to early days, when he, a student of Baliol, had looked up to Dr. Pecock as one of the most learned and popular men in Oxford. The Bishop's face had greatly

altered and saddened since that time, and his manner was absent and preoccupied, though it had lost none of its mild graciousness. But when, in the course of conversation, Sir Piers chanced to allude to their mutual acquaintance Sir Armine, the effect was magical.

Bishop Reginald looked up with a beaming smile.

‘My friend and brother!’ he exclaimed; and then followed such a panegyric of the humble chantry priest as made his hearer’s eyes kindle. It broke off, however, with a sigh—

‘Had he continued at my side,’ said the Bishop, ‘how many snares should I have escaped!’

There was mystery in these words to Sir Piers; but he saw the subject had become a painful one, and did not continue it.

An interesting discussion followed on the newly invented art of printing; and the Knight listened attentively, though not without a misgiving that there might be something of Satanic agency in this marvellous and hitherto unheard of process. They discussed their Lenten fare of excellent haddocks, washed

down with milk of almonds, and then retired to rest.

Ere daybreak Sir Piers was waked by the sound of a deep bell tolling ; and starting up to ascertain the cause, heard a monk proclaiming, in measured accents, as he paced the corridor—

‘ Pray for the soul of our holy father Pope Nicholas V., whom it hath pleased the Almighty God to take to Himself.’

able record, the *Earl of Northumberland's Household Book*, can imagine what an undertaking the removal of a nobleman's family from the country to London then was. The string of carts, waggons, and sumpter-horses that poured over Bishop Langton's causeway, and through the west-gate of the Close, seemed endless. They carried 'my lord's household stuff,' and were led and guarded by his 'yeomen, henchmen, falconers, grooms of the kechyng, squillery, buttery,' and by other functionaries. These formed the first detachment, and arrived some hours before the rest. The Baron himself rode with his children and most of his guests, while Sir Ranulph occupied an unwieldy-looking but very comfortable litter, which Lord Audeley insisted on substituting for the less luxurious 'whirlicote.' Lady Dutton also preferred this mode of travelling; and, being drawn by six strong horses, they managed to keep up with the rest of the party. Four only of Lord Audeley's eight chaplains accompanied him to town—the dean and subdean of his chapel, the secretary of his household, and 'clerke of the signett.' Under their charge were placed the six choristers, or 'chylde of the chappyl,' as they were called, who formed

a part of every large establishment. 'My lord's mynstralls,' a jocund company, travelled together in a covered waggon, amusing themselves with glee and catch; they carried with them their instruments—tabrets, lutes, and three-stringed rebecks—carefully packed up.

The female servants and waiting-women rode on 'stout naggess,' under the rigid duennaship of Parnel. Very dignified she looked, enthroned on a kind of chair-saddle, with a hood of fine scarlet cloth towering above her withered features and high steeple-shaped head-gear. Woe to the rash serving-man, henchman, or pantler who should venture to address a remark to any one of the bevy under her charge. He was sure of detection by her sharp eye, and reprimand from her sharper tongue. Having duly exhorted him to keep his distance, she would turn to the maidens with a lecture on shame-faced and modest mannerliness, and on the advantages, present and to come, of virtuous conduct. This subject she would enforce and illustrate by anecdotes of the early life of one well known to her, and not unremembered in the Burgundian Court as a favourite attendant of the late Duchess Michelle. A mysterious halo would for awhile invest this personage,

whose beauty, now (perchance) dimmed by time, had once excited the admiring glances and whispers of Burgundian gallants, but who, faithful to one who had loved her well, and called her his wedded wife for two short years, had steadfastly refused to marry again. Ere this point in the narrative was reached, the speaker's eagerness, or perhaps a change from the third to the first person, no sooner said than recalled, excited a suspicion in the hearers that the relater and the heroine of the tale might be one and the same. If any ventured to hint this suspicion, they were gently chidden for over-bold prying, but with more of a smile than a frown; then, clearing her throat, and adjusting her spectacles, she would take up the broken thread of her narrative.

Cecily thoroughly enjoyed a few hours' release from her attendance on her grandfather. There was something in Eglanbie Trowtbecke that attracted, while it slightly awed her; and as the two girls became more intimate, and conversed freely on all subjects but one, Cecily's interest in her companion grew warm. Friendship it could not be called as yet; nay, she doubted whether it could ever become such, for Eglanbie's turn of mind was very peculiar.

Motherless from childhood, and having no sister, she had been brought up entirely with her two brothers. Field-sports of every kind, even to the daring and dangerous boar-hunt, were familiar to her, but her heart was not given to them. Like many women in that and the next century, she found her chief delight in abstruse studies, and so far she and the golden-haired Cecily were agreed. But the object of their studies was wholly different. A deep love of truth was the basis of Cecily's character, and truth, even in the most corrupt age, is never sought after in vain. Those heavenly influences which she, ignorantly but honestly, asked through the mediation of the blessed saints, were showered upon her by the King of saints Himself. Through the deep twilight of error, His Cross was still a glorious point of light; and she, helped by the teaching of the good chantry priest, had groped her way to the foot of it, and found rest. Thus all her aims and pursuits were hallowed; and with a free, happy mind, she sought for knowledge, wittingly 'refusing the evil and choosing the good.'

Eglanbie had been trained mostly by her brother's preceptor—a Florentine priest of

great classical learning and refined wit, but no principle. Such men then swarmed in Italy, and were denounced forty years later by Savonarola as 'neglecting the study of the Scriptures for that of astrology,' and 'worshipping Plato instead of Christ.' Their admiration of Plato's sublime morality did not prevent them, however, from leading selfish and vicious lives. So it was with this Fabrizio; and his worthlessness, gilded over by an irresistible charm of manner, rendered him a most dangerous guide for Eglanbie. She was his best, in fact his only pupil, for to no kind of study did her brothers seriously incline. He taught her Greek and Latin, and initiated her in the miserable 'Platonist' philosophy of his country, and in the deeper and more dangerous study of what were then called 'the hidden sciences.' She shrank back from them at first; but for her strong and inquiring mind mystery soon acquired a charm, and, stifling some promptings of her better angel, she plunged with her whole mind into these exciting pursuits. A check, however, came from the quarter where she least expected it.

The old chamberlain, her father, as doughty but as illiterate a knight as ever signed his

mark to a title-deed, learnt by chance the true nature of her studies with Fabrizio. Great was his consternation and wrath at the discovery. Fabrizio was dismissed with ignominy, and his unhappy pupil peremptorily forbidden ever to open the fascinating pages of astrology or alchemy again. How far she obeyed the paternal command we will not now inquire. At sixteen she was launched into Queen Margaret's Court, in all the pride of beauty, wit, and boundless self-confidence. What position could be more dangerous for one whose sense of right and wrong had been prematurely blunted?

As they left the flat country, and entered upon Cannock Chase, the spirits of the whole party rose. The swelling outline of its round hills looked beautiful against a pale-blue sky; brooks of exquisite clearness danced and murmured alongside of their track; and when they began to ascend one of the many knolls before them, groups of silvery birches, bursting into blue-green leaf, pleased and refreshed the eye. Many deer lay hidden among the dead bracken, but rose with glancing horns and startled eye at the traveller's approach.

The highest part of Cannock Chase is a

broad expanse of waste ground, delightful by reason of its fresh pure air, and the glorious panorama visible from it. Here Piers Dutton, with his sisters and Lettice, indulged their frolicksome mood to the utmost, racing with one another, and startling the moor-game from their coverts. Sir Thomas, or the Baron himself, was arbiter of these races. Even John Dutton caught the mirthful infection, and laid by his court parlance, till the epithet of 'Uncle,' inadvertently applied to him by Lettice, acted like a stab to his sensitive vanity. Feeling no inclination to be regarded in so patriarchal a light by the merry group, he reined in his horse, and returned to Eglanbie's side.

Meanwhile another party of horsemen were crossing the Chase, in the direction of Lichfield. At the head of them rode the Bishop of Chester, with Sir Piers Holforde. The Abbot of Raunton courteously accompanied his guests for a mile or two, but excused himself from going further on the plea of business.

'The Archdeacon of Stafford,' he said, 'using the powers entrusted to him, hath taken into custody a family suspected of Lollardry in our neighbourhood. He hath sent the poor caitiffs to me to be examined of their heresy; and had

your lordship made longer tarriance with us, I would have besought your aid in the matter.'

'It is, perhaps, for your better security, my Lord Abbot, not to do so,' replied the Bishop, with a sad smile. 'Rash as it may appear in me, the unworthiest, youngest, and lowest of prelates, to differ from my brethren, yet can I not reconcile my mind to consigning these poor miscreants to fire or dungeon. I would meet such unobediencers in another manner, that of gentle suasion, and clear and behoveful setting of the truth before them.'

'Tedious work you would find it, my lord,' answered the Abbot, with a sneer, 'in this district, where Lollards lie as thick as ash-keys on the ground in October. Credit me, this pestilent heresy, which infecteth every village, will not be put down by wordy weapons.'

'Nay, my Lord Abbot, nay,' rejoined Bishop Reginald; 'I have spoken oft-times with the wittiest and cunningest men of thilk said sort, men contrary to the Church, and held as dukes among their Wycliffist brethren, and they have hearkened to me, and even loved me for that I would patiently and without exprobatation hear them out.'

Such were, almost verbatim, the words in

which this good man clothed sentiments far in advance of his age. The annals of the time give us but an incomplete and shadowy account of Bishop Pecock, yet the little we know of him engages both our love and pity. 'He was,' wrote one of our best theologians,* in the last century, 'a very honest man and one of the ablest divines of that age. His misfortune was, that he undertook to defend a very corrupt church against the Wicliffites, upon a *scriptural* and *rational* foot. It was impossible for him to do it but by softening and disguising several principles and practices then prevailing. He made some concessions (to the Reformers) which were very just, but which so corrupt a state of the Church could not bear; his enemies (some through envy, some through superstitious zeal) took the advantage, and aggravated everything to the utmost, and thus a great and good man fell a sacrifice.'

The catastrophe was delayed two years; but slander was already at work, and the meshes of the net which was finally to catch him were closing round this kindly and conscientious prelate. His mind was not of the fearless cast

* Daniel Waterland.

that marks reformers; diligent study of the Scriptures had indeed shown him something of the corruptions of his Church, and of the iniquity of withholding those Scriptures from the people, and he laboured to remove these evils, by forwarding a translation of the Bible, and by exposing sundry false miracles lately wrought. But he was no Lollard; Wicliffe and his followers had unhappily mixed up politics with their teaching, and openly held that 'clergy and laity might be deprived of their property if they sinned, sin being treason against God.' This, and such like maxims, wherein truth was mixed with error, had spread a levelling spirit abroad, and were supposed to have spurred on Wat Tyler and his mob to the excesses committed in their famous insurrection. Therefore Bishop Pecock and many other lovers of order, held aloof from the reforming party, and their 'good'—'priceless, transcendent good'—'was evil spoken of.'

The Abbot of Raunton turned to go home, coldly saying—

'Have a care, my Lord, lest the Lollard snake you are warming in your bosom should wake and sting you.'

His departure was a relief to all, and the Bishop and knight rode on in silence; a silence

more sociable than conversation. The refined scholar had more in common with the bluff soldier than with the cold, selfish ecclesiastic, and so he looked up, not ill-pleased, when Sir Piers at last said—

‘If my ignorance deceive me not, our friend Father Armine thinketh with your lordship in these matters?’

‘I believe so,’ replied the Bishop; ‘there was even a brotherly concord in our opinions since the day we first consorted at Oxford. That was in the year of salvation 1415, now forty years ago. The Parliament convoked at Leicester had passed a law that all judges, justices of the peace, sheriffs, and mayors should be sworn to assist in rooting out Lollardry, and bringing its professors to justice. This new law made no small noise in Oxford, and we students of Oriel discoursed thereupon with the freedom of rash youth. I mind me well, how Armine and I were agreed in misliking it.’

‘I love not the fire-and-faggot remedy either,’ observed Sir Piers, ‘albeit my trade of war doth inure its followers to violence and bloodshed; I think I would liefer fight my way through ten thousand Frenchmen than see one heretic burn.’

‘ Scarce six weeks after the passing of that statute at Leicester,’ said the Bishop, ‘ a furrier of London, John Claydon, was seized and put in mew as a relapsed heretic. The poor caitiff could not read, yet were some English books found in his house, and three of his servants bore testimony that their master used to delight in hearing them read. One of them, yclept the *Lanterne of Light*, was, the Mayor averred, the vilest and most pestilent book that pen of man ever transcribed. The doctors who examined this work deponed that it contained no less than fifteen heresies, and for subscribing to these Claydon suffered death at Smithfield. My brother Armine and I met the procession on its way, and verily I could not choose but weep at the sight of that woful but resolved face. I may have been deceived, for Sathanas doth sometimes put on the garb of an angel of light, but to me it seemed not the face of one about to die in mortal sin. Perchance he marked our glance of pity, for he unfolded his arms, and stretched them towards us, yet more as one beckoning than entreating; something he seemed about to speak, but the yelling multitude urged him on, and we saw him no more. Armine looked steadfastly at me, and

said, 'The weapons of our warfare are not fleshly.'

'In my Oxford days,' rejoined Piers, '(days I still hold in dear remembrance) these matters were freely discoursed of in our hearing. Men boldly imputed the growth of Lollardry to the ignorance and evil living of many priests, and to the griping avarice of others, who held as many as a score of benefices together. But I pain you, reverend father, by this rash discourse, and will forbear.'

'Alas, my son,' the Bishop replied, 'you speak but truth; and it is the grief of all honest hearts in England that it should be so; and not in England only, for the plague is widespread. Italy, once fountain-head of light, is now the centre of darkness. Many affirm that faith can no longer be found on earth, that Antichrist is at the door, and the day of doom at hand. For myself, I credit not these prophesyings, but look and hope for better things shortly; there be yet many good Christians scattered over the length and breadth of the land, and many pure and holy men ministering in God's sanctuary. These be the stars that twinkle before day-dawn; the harbingers, we trust, of a brighter light.'

‘And, my Lord,’ asked Piers, now thoroughly interested in the discussion, ‘think you that strange art of printing, whereof you and the Abbot discoursed last night, will tend to good? I have heard my Lord of Worcester speak of it as of the very key of knowledge.’

‘The knowledge of good and evil, my son,’ answered Bishop Reginald, musingly; ‘yet mostly of good, I trust, if so be our knowledge puff us not up. We clerks, and ye also of the lay party, have need to chastise ourselves full well and full virtuously from pride and presumption, or ever we meddle with things divine. I have striven to set forth these truths more fully in divers little books, writ by me in our mother-tongue and in laymen’s language; they relate to sundry matters of faith and practice, and be altogether grounded on Holy Scripture. Ho! Basil!’ said the Bishop, turning to a young deacon, who rode behind him, ‘find me a copy of the *Provoker of Cristien Men*, the fairest and best indited ye have with you, and bring it hither for this worshipful knight.’

The deacon obeyed with great alacrity; and a small book, beautifully indited on vellum,

was presently brought to the Bishop, and by him presented to Sir Piers. The knight received it with unaffected gratitude, and a pleasurable thought of the enjoyment it would afford to Cecily. Bishop Reginald was pleased too, for, to say the truth, if he had a foible, it was that of regarding his 'litel bokes' with over-much complacency and fondness. We are tempted to smile at the *naïveté* with which he introduces them to his readers as 'quikli and smertli' written; 'which bokes,' he adds, 'if ye wolen rede diligentli and attend thereto studioseli, and not for to take an hasti smel or smatche in them, and soon laie them aside . . . ye schullen finde in them great witt and learninge of Cristien religion.' But the smile is soon repressed; and as we read on we are struck with the earnest piety and the strain of Christian gentleness which breathe in every page; and then we heave a sigh for the hapless writer, and grieve that so good a man should have fallen on such dark and perplexing times.

Sir Piers placed the book reverently in his gypsire, then resumed the conversation, which turned on lighter topics.

The Bishop talked agreeably of a journey he had just taken in Yorkshire, and a visit he paid

at Bolton Hall,* the seat of the Pudsey family, and, as he justly remarked, one of the oldest dwelling-houses in England.

He related how an attack of illness had detained him in those parts, and said that he was returning home by slow journeys, and hoped to reach Chichester by Easter-day. They touched upon politics, cautiously at first, but with less reserve as each discovered that the other's sentiments coincided with his own. The Bishop, however, spoke of impending events in the peaceful, unworldly spirit that became his calling, expressing his trust that the Duke of York would not press his claim, and that the present Chancellor, Cardinal Bouchier, who was known to be a Yorkist in heart, might mediate successfully between the two parties.

Piers shook his head despairingly, but said nothing.

The sun was low in the heavens when they reached an eminence whence Lichfield could first be seen. That beautiful city wore a far sterner aspect then than now. It was encompassed with a wall, and guarded on the east

* This visit of Bishop Pecock's is mentioned in the *Antiquarian Repertory*, vol. iii.

side by a strong castle, of which not a vestige is left. Both were the work of Bishop Clinton in the twelfth century. The Cathedral, in its prime of beauty and glory, stood forth, dark and still, its three spires shooting up far into the glowing sky. The Close was not, as now, a green and peaceful spot, but strongly fortified with walls and bastions, and defended by a deep ditch on the north and east sides; the south and west were flanked by the Minster Pool, a sheet of water with marshy banks, stretching eastward towards St. Chad's. The white mists of evening were floating over it, and caught something of the rosy hues of sunset.

A fine causeway and drawbridge, the work of that magnificent prelate Walter de Langton, connected the west-end of the Close with the city, and so did a smaller bridge and postern-gate on the south side. Many substantial houses, several monasteries and hospitals, and two or three church spires were grouped picturesquely round the Minster; but she rose above them all in queenly state, or rather as the very emblem and type of the Church militant here in earth, prepared to resist the attacks of enemies below, but all the while pointing steadfastly to heaven.

Nor was the stir of life wanting to give cheerfulness to the scene. The Lord of Audeley's party, a gay and gallant train, came in view, and were recognised and soon joined by the travellers. The sound of church and convent bells, and the voices of comers and goers rose through the air cheerily. Only one mournful and loathsome spectacle, a very usual one then near great towns, disfigured the view; and that was a row of gibbets, on one of which hung the body of a lately-executed criminal. There was a throng collected at this spot; and as our party drew near, they could distinguish a squalid-looking peasant, in a leather jerkin and with a red cap drawn low upon his brows, struggling in the hands of some officers of justice. They were endeavouring to drag him to the foot of the gibbet, he clinging with all his might to the stone cross which marked the place of execution. Two monks from the Grey-friars' house in Lichfield were urging him to confess and seek absolution, but their zealous exhortations were unheard in the desperate struggle for life. A third monk, habited in black, stood by, watching the contest with a mixture of distress, curiosity, and compassion in his face. To him Lord Audeley turned for

some account of the disturbance; the monk eyed him shrewdly for a moment, then answered,—

‘So please you, noble sir, this is a malefactor justly doomed to die by the Guildmaster of Lichfield and his fellows, who doth yet stubbornly refuse to submit to his sentence.’

‘What was his offence, I pray you, good brother?’ inquired Bishop Reginald.

‘A heinous one, Lord Bishop, for such I perceive you to be; even the murder of a poor monk who, with me, travelled hither last week from Coventry. We are both from the Abbey of Chester, and I, whom men call ‘Don Henry Francis,’ am known to some as the reviver of the Mystery plays writ one hundred years ago by the monk Randall Heguenette, in our mother tongue, but lately much disused. Whitsun plays they be called, being mostly performed at that joyful tide.’

‘I have heard of you,’ said the Bishop; ‘you were thought a bold man for bringing those plays into notice; but it is my belief the Church oweth you thanks for so doing. Proceed, friend.’

‘At Shrovetide,’ pursued Don Henry, ‘we

did, with the Bishop's permission, perform one play at Coventry; and now the townsmen of this place have prayed us to make a part of their Easter pageant. On our way hither, last week, our baggage, consisting of the needful gear for the 'Mystery play,' and sundry precious relics besides, excited the cupidity of this bad fellow. He and others fell upon us unawares; but we fought stoutly for our gear, specially brother Jerome, who was a man of stalwart frame and brave spirit. Alas, he fell, pierced in the back by those ruffians. A party of traders coming by saw our distress, and giving chase to the murderers, apprehended this man.'

'Come away, my Lord,' said the Baron to Bishop Reginald. 'I read in your face the merciful wish of your heart; but, in sooth, intercession for one so flagrantly guilty were weakness, not compassion.'

'Most true,' replied the Bishop. 'It were a gross abuse of mine episcopal privilege to beg a life so justly forfeited; but for the soul of this poor wretch I would fain make some effort. Would that he might be brought to shrift and true penitence!'

'His time waxeth short,' observed Don

Henry, pointing to the western sky. ‘Our brethren of the Friars Minors have wrestled with him since three of the clock, but to no purpose. At sunset his time of grace doth expire, and much I fear he will depart ‘unhoused, unanealed.’’

In fact the red sun now touched the horizon with his disk; the culprit’s struggles relaxed from mere exhaustion, and his arms dropped hopelessly by his side. Silently and vacantly his eyes wandered round the circle of spectators till they rested on the face of young Hamo, then with a low groan and convulsive movement he turned aside as if to hide his shame and misery.

‘Holy Mary,’ cried Hamo, turning pale, ‘’tis Black Skelhorne himself from our green.’

The lad drew back, but at a sign from Sir Piers approached the criminal, who seemed suddenly desirous of speaking with him.

‘Hamo,’ he said, hoarsely but vehemently, ‘an thou lovest thine own mother, let not mine know of this. The word gallows hath an ugly sound; never let her hear it breathed, lad, never, never!’

He stopped with a strange choking in his throat. The Bishop, who had dismounted and

drawn near, urged by compassion for that sinful soul, now turned to the Guildmaster's deputy,—

‘Grant me one boon, good sir,’ he said; ‘even that this poor wretch may live till curfew-toll. Myself will stay with him, and by God's help urge him to a free confession of his crimes.’

The words, uttered with mild dignity, sounded like an entreaty, but were felt to be a command.

Lord Audeley and his party rode on, leaving the Bishop attended by two of his chaplains, and by Basil, the young deacon-secretary already mentioned. Hamo remained behind, and so did Sir Piers, whose thoughts now recurred to the murder of his pursuivant, with redoubled suspicion that Skelhorne had had a share in that deed, what share, he quickly resolved to ascertain from the villain's own lips.

When Cecily looked back she saw Skelhorne kneeling, with head declined, at the foot of the ‘weeping cross.’ The Bishop knelt beside him, and in low, earnest tones pleaded alternately with the sinner and with God. It would have lightened her heart to know how soon

those pleadings, uttered in the dear 'moder's tongue,' broke down all reserve, how fully and freely the torrent of wild, broken confession and self-accusation burst from the sinner's lips. We need not enter into the details of Skelhorne's dark story, nor trace back as he did his first acquaintance with desperate crime, to the day when he became a tool in Sir Roger's hands. A few burning words from Piers made clear to the Bishop the object of this conspiracy, Sir Roger's long-standing grudge against the Dones, and against the knight himself, his malignant desire to break off the marriage, and the sordid love of money which had prompted him to sell back the dispensation to its owner for fourscore pieces of gold.

Skelhorne owned to the murder of Lancelyn, and with no attempt at self-defence; but in the plain language of truth told how Sir Roger, maddened by the fear of detection, had urged him to it. This, his first deed of blood, had filled Skelhorne's mind with remorse; and Sir Roger's artful persuasions, strengthened by a bribe, had easily persuaded him and his accomplices to fly the country. The Vicar for his own ends spread the report that they had taken refuge in Wales or Lancashire. They had,

however, joined a gang of outlaws in Cannock Chase ; but the 'vengeance which suffereth not a murderer to live,' had swiftly overtaken them. Skelhorne's fate we know, and his partner in crime had already been apprehended for some previous offence, and was awaiting death in the dungeons of Stafford Castle.

The rapid confession was ended, and its main facts committed to writing by the Deacon Basil. The Bishop then dismissed Sir Piers and Hamo, and remained alone with the culprit and his guards. Twilight had crept over earth and sky, and was giving way to dusky evening, when the first curfew-toll was heard. Its clangour made the air vibrate for awhile, then died away. Bishop Reginald's mournful task was over, and he pursued his way, heavy and oppressed in spirit, yet not altogether hopeless, that the absolution spoken on earth might have been ratified in heaven. His was the overflowing, boundless charity which can 'view God's least and worst with hope to meet again.'

Lord Audeley and his cavalcade had reached Lichfield without further adventures. Outside the gate John Dutton dismounted to exchange his 'stout Irish nagge' for the 'great gambaul-

ding horse he was used to goe through townes upon.' As he rode along he made his spirited animal prance and curvette repeatedly, and by this manœuvre became the 'observed of all observers' in the unusually-thronged streets and market-place.

Divers of the neighbouring gentry were to be met coming into their town-houses for the approaching solemnities; carts laden with provisions and furniture, and decked with the first-budding branches to be borne in the procession of the morrow, choked the narrow lanes; and within the Close stood two or three waggons, containing the stage, dresses, masks, and other paraphernalia requisite for the due performance of Don Randal Heguenette's Mystery play.

Sir Ranulph, much fatigued by his journey, was carried into the episcopal dwelling; a noble mansion built at the east end of the Close by Walter de Langton. Its hall was more than a hundred feet long, lofty in proportion, and surrounded by a series of pictures representing the principal exploits of King Edward I. The rude but vivid colouring of these storied walls had a fine effect, though their subjects were better suited to the abode of some warlike baron than that of an ambassador of peace.

The state chamber, prepared for Sir Ranulph, was more appropriately fitted up, the walls being covered with beautiful tapestry, representing the life and acts of the prophet Samuel. The bed was hung with arras, a richer and finer kind of tapestry, newly imported from the city of that name in Flanders. A coved recess, with a window looking to the Cathedral, was fitted up as an oratory, and folding-doors at one side of the room opened to the Bishop's private chapel, a small but beautiful edifice in the Early Decorated style.

Lord Audeley himself conducted Sir Ranulph to his chamber, then left him to the tendance of his granddaughters and Parnel. Cecily followed him to the door with thanks for the consideration which had surrounded her invalid with luxuries, while the Baron's own apartment was bare of all furniture but a truckle-bed, a table, and two or three chairs.

But he replied somewhat gruffly—

‘Tilly-vally, child! Dost think these grisly locks need a Venetian mirror to set them in order by? Go back to thy patient, and see that Mistress Parnel (is not that her name?) do not overdrench him with her composing or stimulating drinks. Marry, she and my

daughter Dutton do discourse of nothing but simples, and right simple discourse I hold it to be! I am glad to see that saucy smile, maiden. Now, farewell; and cocker thy grandfather well, that he may be able to receive a guest I purpose bringing to his bedside to-night.'

By the aid of the despised sedatives Sir Ranulph obtained an hour's calm sleep, and was able to greet the Baron cheerfully when he visited him after compline.

Lord Audeley half apologized for bringing with him a gentleman-usher, newly attached to his person,—'a stripling,' he said, 'of great promise, meet for courtly bower or tented field.'

With a glowing face, Maurice, for it was he, came forward, and bent the knee to his grandfather. Fear and anxiety as to his reception clouded his fair young brow; and shame was there too, for well he remembered that he had parted from Sir Ranulph in petulant displeasure. Some hasty word, some slight to his boyish dignity, too trifling to be remembered now, had made the hot blood boil, and he had left him in anger. And now he saw him again—wan, wasted, suffering; and, at the sight, scalding tears sprang to his eyes.

The aged knight raised him, and kissed his forehead with mingled tenderness and pride. The passages between them which smote Maurice's conscience had vanished from Sir Ranulph's memory, together with the troubled dreams and occasional delirium that haunted his sick bed. He looked fondly at Maurice, and murmured some lines from the old *Romaunce of King Horne*.

He is fayre, and eke bold,
 And of fyfteene wynters old ;
 White as any lilye floure,
 Rosie red is his coloure ;
 There is none that is his like
 Not in all the king his reich.*

Then clasping the boy's hand, he added—
 'Last hope of our ancient house, soon to be its head ! Thou art young, my son, to have this burden laid upon thee. God make thee strong to bear it—loyal to thy chief—kind to thy sisters,—above all, true to thyself.'

He paused, much overcome ; but presently said—

'I can talk no more to-night, yet is thy presence soothing, my Maurice. Go, fetch thy

* Kingdom.

lute, dear boy, and sing some of the lays thy mother taught thee.'

Maurice turned away abruptly, as if in search of his lute. Lettice placed it in his hand, and hung over him, while, with trembling fingers and face averted from the bright burning tapers, he ran through a low prelude. Then he sang a ballad, of which the first words are these:—

O synge unto mie roundelaie,
 O drop the bryny tear with me;
 Daunce ne moe at hallidaye,
 Lyke a running river bee!
 My love is deade,
 Gone to his death bedde,
 All under the willow tree.

Sweet his tongue as throstle's note,
 Quick in dance as thought can be;
 Deft his tabor, cudgelle stoute,
 Oh! he lies by the willow tree!
 My love is deade, &c.

'The lay is sweet,' said Sir Ranulph, 'and mindeth me of days gone by; yet is it of earth—and I, methinks, am warned to trim my wings for another sphere.'

'Brother,' whispered Letitia, 'sing our mother's evening hymn.'

'Alas! Lettice, I have forgotten it,' said

the boy, colouring ; ‘ such lays be never heard at Shene save when the children of the chapel sing to King Henry. But, now, I bethink me, there is the song of Our Lady, written by one Lydgate, a monk of Bury, and much delighted in by our King’s father, of glorious memory. I will strive to recal it.’

Sir Ranulph listened while Maurice chanted in slow and measured strains Lydgate’s graceful lines to the Blessed Virgin. They ended thus—

Now fayrest starre, O starre of starrys all,
 Whose light to see the angels do delyte,
 So let the gold-dewe of thy grace yfall
 Into my breste, lyke scalès fayre and white.
 Me to inspire

As he sang the darkness without grew thicker. Flickering clouds obscured the young moon ; but, as if in answer to Maurice’s voice, one constellation after another came sparkling out, clustering as it were round the dark outline of the slender spires. Orion and Spica Virginis glittered with peculiar splendour over the south-east pinnacles of the cathedral ; and now a small door in the north transept opened, and a little band of choir boys came forth, and wended their way two and two

towards their dormitory at the west end of the Close. As they went they sang thus :—

Jesu, for Thy muchele might,
 Give us of Thy grace,
 That we moe both day and night
 Thinken of Thy face.
 In mine heart it doth me good
 When y think on Jesu's blood
 That ran down His syde ;
 From His harte down to His foote
 For us He shedde His hartis bloode,
 His woundes were so wide.

Rude as those lines were (and they date among the oldest attempts at versification in our language), they brought a glow of comfort to the spirit of the sick man. With a tranquil smile he dismissed his children and friends. They retired, Lord Audeley and Sir Piers, to an anxious conference with Bishop Reginald and the Guildmaster, touching Skelhorne's disclosures; the remaining inmates of the palace, to sleep.

CHAPTER IX.

OF THE JOUST.

Say who thou art
 And why thou com'st, thus knightly clad in arms ?
 Against what man thou com'st, and what thy quarrel ;
 Speak truly on thy knighthood and thy oath,
 And so defend thee Heaven, and thy valour !

Richard II.

With dirge in marriage.

Hamlet.

LONG before sunrise on Palm Sunday there was a sound of voices and busy feet in the old town, peasants and their families flocking in, arrayed in holiday garb, and pilgrims going to and fro between the city and the neighbouring church and fountain of Stowe, dedicated to St. Chad. The Close lay in aristocratic repose and silence an hour or two later, then woke to enjoy the sweet influences of a lovely spring morning. At eight o'clock the west gate was opened, the portcullis raised, and a band of priests and choristers issued forth from the Cathedral. They bore aloft a crucifix and

a silver chest of relics, and were accompanied by a troop of incense bearers, young boys clad in white.

The Guildmaster and his brethren, in their robes of office, joined the procession as it moved along the street. So did a number of the townspeople, substantial burghers in cloth robes bordered with fur, and their wives trimly arrayed with black silk hoods and mantles partly concealing their snowy partlets, and the bunch of keys hanging at their girdles. Each carried a bough in his or her hand, to represent the palm-branches of Judea.

Every town, probably every parish, in England had its Palm-Sunday procession in those days; but this at Lichfield was unusually numerous and imposing, from the number of strangers who passed that way in travelling between London and the North. As it wound by the chief hostel of the place, a house with far projecting gables overhanging the narrow street, some young gallants who were lounging at the door came forward and joined its ranks. The roving looks and loud whispers of two or three of them showed that curiosity rather than piety impelled them.

But the most distinguished of the number

was a young gentleman who kept aloof from the rest, and accepted with graceful courtesy the green branch offered him by a chorister. He was slight, fair, and rather Italian than English in dress and deportment. The absence of beard and moustache made him look younger than eight-and-twenty, his real age. He wore no armour, nor any weapon except a gold-hilted dagger of the richest Florentine workmanship. Besides the Order of the Garter, he wore the gold Collar of SS; a badge first conferred, it is said, by Henry V. after the battle of Agincourt, and still worn by some of our great functionaries.* He walked alone immediately after the relic-bearers, and three of his servants, olive-complexioned Italians, followed him. His appearance excited much remark, to which, however, he seemed entirely indifferent. But when the procession re-entered the Close, he looked up with evident admiration at the glorious west front of the Minster, and its richly-sculptured doorway. Near the draw-bridge stood a group ready to fall in with the

* The letter S, of a succession of which linked together the collar is composed, is supposed by some to stand for 'Souverayne,' the favourite motto of Henry IV.

procession. Bishop Reginald, arrayed in canonicals, and Lord Audeley, in full armour, but bare-headed, were there; the Dutton brothers, too, and Sir Piers. These last had not been in bed all night, having ridden together to Stafford Castle to examine Skelhorne's accomplice touching the murder of Lancelyn. They had only just returned in time to don their holiday attire, and join the throng of worshippers. Lady Dutton, her son and daughters, Eglanbie, and Sir Ranulph's three grandchildren completed the band. And now all poured into the nave of the Cathedral, which looked glorious with the morning rays streaming in through the stained windows of its apse. They lighted up the vaulted stone roof and the countless slender pillars which support it, and the pavement of alternate squares of white marble and cannel coal, which was then among the glories of the Minster. So grand was the effect, that the highborn stranger we have described drew aside to gaze upon it, and in so doing he met the eye of Sir Piers, and a glance of kindly recognition passed between them.

Now the Dean and a body of clergy came forward to meet the procession, chanting, as the

custom was, 'Lo, thy Kynge milde and meke cometh to thee;' and all the people fell on their knees, singing or saying, or in both manners, 'Hail Thou whom the people of the Jews meeting, confessed to be Jesus of Nazareth.'

So concluded this part of the ceremony. It was followed by the celebration of the mass, during which a few knelt on devoutly; but the most part considering themselves merely spectators, stood up and greeted, or talked with their friends with little restraint.

Such broken snatches of conversation as these might be heard—

'How daintily is our Guildmistress appareled this day! Mark you the fair embroidery on her collar, and yon jewelled brooch she wears in it, as broad as the boss of a buckler!'

'And mark you, neighbour,' was the reply, 'her topknot of silk, set full high, and yon purse of cloth of gold at her girdle! 'Tis a pretty poplette and a gay, and those scarlet hosen beseem her tiny ankles well!'

'Ay, ay,' rejoined the neighbour; 'and she can foot it featly in the dance, too, while the poor Guildmaster sitteth at home and sippeth his posset! Truly he must rue the day when he wed yon black-eyed, weasel-waisted

wench, a score and a half years younger than himself.'

'Good Joyce,' said Giles the armourer, to a pale widow, who leaned wearily against one of the columns, 'how sweetly thy boy Nicholas singeth! that treble of his is tuneable and shrill as the note of the throstle in March!'

The gratified mother looked first at her white-robed boy, then at the kind-hearted armourer, with fond delight.

'Ah, Master Giles, he hath a sweet pipe and a good skill in music, specially in plain chant; but, alack, music is not bread, and oft-times he goeth hungry to bed! We must find some more profitable calling for him!'

'He hath the makings of a cunning clerk about him,' observed Master Giles; 'could not his uncle, the priest at Lutterworth, befriend him?'

'Alas, no!' replied the widow; 'he saith there be no good livings to be had now-a-days; they be all given away to unlearned men for gold, or else to foreigners, thrust upon us by the Pope.'

'Verily,' said Master Giles, 'he speaketh true; it is no rare sight now to see clerks of good name and fame begging an alms about

the country. Two of them came to my door in grievous plight, awhile back. They bare with them certificates writ by the Chancellor of Oxford to their good breeding and learning. With these they had asked an alms at the castle of a great lord, whose name 'twere best conceal. He, being engaged in a drunken revel, sent for them to make him sport, and bade them write some rhymes in his honour. They demurred, as honest men well might, whereat he waxed wroth, and, dragging them to the castle well, thrust them into the buckets thereof, and caused them to be lowered, first one, then the other, into the water, until the couplets were devised.'

'Ah, well-a-day,' sighed the widow; 'my boy shall not be a clerk. Well, God amend all, for there is great need!'

'I meant not to dishearten ye, good mother,' said Master Giles; 'there's the attorney's or the scrivener's trade open to a lad of parts; and if all trades fail, send him to me—there be worse callings than an armourer's, and if men say true, weapons will be needed soon; many an esquire of name hath sent me his hauberk already to break up into a newer fashion of armour.'

So saying, he moved away, after thrusting a

demi-salut* into the widow's hand. Before she had recovered her surprise, he was at the other side of the nave, discussing with some of his own craft the fashion of Lord Audeley's corslet, and the length of his pole-axe.

That nobleman, true to his notions of discipline, in church as on the battle-field, neither spoke nor moved till mass was said. Then, coming forth through the exquisitely-sculptured north doorway, he returned with a cordial 'God save you, friends,' the greetings of many bystanders. It was true of him, as of his great rival the king-making Warwick, that 'full fraught was he with good qualities, right excellent and manie; all which a certain natural grace did so far forth recommend, that with high and low he was held in singular favour and good liking.' Seeing the noble stranger in conference with Sir Piers, the Baron accosted him with a hearty invitation to the banquet they were about to sit down to.

'My Lord of Worcester,' he added, 'I am fain to see you here. You and I have met full seldom; but, in your noble father, the Lord Tiptoft's day, 'twas otherwise. Many a

* A silver coin of that day.

time and oft have we two sat together, as triers of petitions in the House of Peers, and his calmer judgment was ever a stay to mine; say, by what chance come you hither?’

‘It is a good and happy chance,’ replied Lord Worcester, ‘that procureth me this meeting with my father’s friend. I am from Derbyshire, my Lord, where I have some patrimonial estates that needed inspection, ere my purposed departure from England.’

‘I grieve to hear of such a purpose,’ said the Baron, ‘especially at this time of straitness and peril; but perchance, my Lord, you go not further than the ‘narrow seas,’ whereof you have been the brave and vigilant guardian this last year and a half.’

‘My duty there is expired,’ replied Lord Worcester; ‘and sooth to say, I would have resigned, had it not. Meseems it is high time to do so when the Duke of Somerset, England’s foe and mine, is preferred to the captainship of Calais, and Richard of York ignominiously thrust out of it.’

‘Is that so?’ exclaimed Lord Audeley. ‘Somerset, Captain of Calais? Somerset, who lost us Normandy, entrusted with the key of that most precious jewel of the Crown? Speak

again, John Tiptoft; say it is impossible—mere moonstruck madness!’

‘Myself heard it proclaimed by royal ordonnance,’ replied the Earl; ‘and methought the words thrilled through mine ear like the first trumpet-call to battle; great wrath and searchings of heart did they cause among the citizens of London, who already hang more to Richard of York than to the King.’

‘Why, ’tis but the other day,’ observed Sir Piers to the Bishop, ‘that the Duke of York had a grant of Calais made to him under Privy Seal, and that for seven years; this is the Queen’s doing.’

The good prelate shook his head, ‘*Quem Deus vult perdere, prius dementat,*’ said he, mournfully.

Lord Audeley was much perturbed, and the indignation which his good, old-fashioned loyalty suffered him not to express, found itself another channel, and flowed forth like a stream of lava.

‘Is this the time you choose for foreign travel?’ he said, turning to the Earl of Worcester. ‘You, my lord, on whom our King hath heaped honours, possessions, offices—nay, that most weighty of charges, the High Treasurer-

ship of this realm; truly, it were ill-done to forsake him now, for England's last hope of cure departs with her best and noblest sons.'

Lord Worcester, though calm by nature, and not easily roused to anger, was stung by this taunt, and might have answered warmly, but Sir Piers said in his ear, 'Answer him gently; if he speak in bitterness, it is not against you; his eldest son hath even now plucked the White Rose of York.'

The Earl replied calmly to Lord Audeley—

'His Majesty hath indeed been gracious beyond my deserts, and beyond my desires also; Heaven knoweth I lay these offices down with more joy than ever I took them up. Dearer to me the banks of Isis and its shading elms than all the glitter of courts; and since, even in those sacred cloisters, peace no longer may be found, I seek it in the learned halls of Padua and Rome.'

'Strange,' said the Baron, with restored serenity, 'that book-lore should hold such empire over the mind; yet so it is, and my clerkly son Edmund loveth his prebendal cloister at York better than tilt or tournament. But we are observed; hence, gentles all, and let us to dinner with what appetite we may.'

The guests obeyed the hospitable summons, Lord Worcester first beckoning two of his servants, and dispatching them to the hostel with orders to fetch him a certain casket. With a quick glance and 'Subito, Eccellenza,' they vanished; but ere the guests had finished washing their hands in the silver basins of perfumed water prepared for them, they returned, and presented the casket to their master. He unlocked it, and laid before Sir Piers, with a look of triumph, the long-wished-for parchment, containing a permission for his marriage.

'See, my Piers,' said the Earl, 'the study of Virgilius and Strabo hath not made me forgetful of thy matters. I have haunted the Court of Arches night and morning, till the poor dean was glad to rid him of me at any cost; nay, I have besieged your Bishop and the Cardinal Primate himself till they began to look askance at me; lo, here is the happy fruit of so much importunity!'

The knight wrung his friend's hand in silent gratitude, and Lord Worcester continued—

'Now, I pray thee, bring me to speech of thy affianced wife; St. Chad forgive me if mine eyes wandered sometimes from his

jewelled shrine in the minster to seek her out! So well hadst thou portrayed her to me, Piers, that I knew her at once among the kneeling throng. With the palm-branch from Nazareth in her hand, and the snowy veil over her brow, she looked like one of those heavenly messengers whom the divine limner Angelico of Fiesolè doth paint—kneeling as he paints!’

‘She cometh even now,’ said Sir Piers, as Cecily was seen running noiselessly down the broad staircase from her grandfather’s chamber. She paused at his call, and with modest grace received the greetings of his friend, and suffered Lord Worcester to lead her to her place in the banqueting-hall.

‘We were even now,’ he said, ‘speaking of the most marvellous painter the world ever saw, brother John of Fiesolè, rightly named the Angelic. When Piers and I were together in Rome, two years since, he was by command of Pope Nicholas adorning his private chapel with most exquisite paintings. Often did we two sit watching his pencil, and deem it dipped in the very hues of heaven.’

‘It is so dipped,’ said Cecily, ‘if report speak true; for I have heard that he ever beginneth and endeth his work with prayer.’

Lord Worcester smiled at her enthusiasm.

‘Would you could see him, lady, with his benign and venerable aspect, making stern self-denial appear lovely ; the praise of man affects him not, and he hath refused the pastoral crozier of Florence, and all other dignities, that he may promote the glory of God by his own divine art.’

So they talked, Cecily growing more bright and eager each moment ; her only interruption was an occasional glance towards Maurice, who was performing his new duties of gentleman-usher, and marshalling the little band of yeomen-ushers placed under his control, to the Lady of Dutton’s perfect satisfaction.

‘Italy is a land of marvels, a heaven on earth to such as delight in all things beautiful,’ resumed Lord Worcester ; ‘if the sublime and fearful have charms for you, lady, there is the Campo Santo of Pisa, a burying-place for the faithful. Its very earth is hallowed soil from Palestine, and round it be awful pictures of the ‘Day of Doom,’ painted by Andrea di Orcagna, the Dante, to my thinking, as Fra Angelico is the Petrarch, of his art.’

‘Oh, I have pondered these things from a child,’ said Cecily. ‘My dearest mother so-

journed at fair Florence in her youth, and taught me to love Italy, its clear skies, its blue and tideless sea, its shores fringed with myrtle and orange-groves; oft I dream of them with thirsty heart.'

The man of the world was both touched and amused by these guileless revelations; but he said, earnestly—

'Then, lady, add your influence to mine, with Sir Piers, and he will not say you nay; urge him to quit for a few short years this island of fogs and storms, of civil broils and divided allegiance; let him bring you to Italy; there, amid all that is precious, of art and nature, and congenial friendships, you shall own that your brightest dreams fell short of the truth.'

'My lord,' Cecily began, with faltering voice and heightened colour; but the Earl continued—

'Tell him the dark waters of ruin will soon overflow this land, and then where shall his dove find a rest for the sole of her foot so safe as the olive-groves of Italy? Say, gentle Cecily, hath the thought no delights for you?'

'It is infinitely delightful,' she replied, eagerly; but the colour faded as she spoke, and

with changed expression, and a look of serious resolve, she said—

‘I know his mind, my lord, on this subject, and it is made up; I durst not, if I would, strive to shake him; for, as a son loveth his mother, so doth Piers his country. Much hath he pondered the part that he ought to take in the forthcoming struggle, and full well I know he would deem it a sin to shrink therefrom.’

‘And your safety, your peace, shall these be unregarded by him?’ asked Lord Worcester.

‘God and His angels will care for them,’ she answered; ‘and I too have ties at home;—oh, how precious! Out upon me that I could for one instant forget them!’

She saw him wince, and could not fully divine why; but added, with a smile—

‘’Twere best speak no more on this matter. It was but yesterday I read of an Arabian prince who was journeying towards Damascus. As he drew near, and saw the surpassing beauty and glory of the city, his soul was at first ravished within him; but when he looked again, he wept, and said, ‘Let us turn back, for it is not granted to mortal man to enjoy more than one Paradise.’

So, perchance, Piers might say to us, were we to play the part of tempters.'

Lord Worcester rose abruptly.

'The bleakest path,' he said, 'is Paradise to him who hath an angel at his side.'

So their discourse ended. The Bishop and Lord Audeley, meanwhile, were engaged in conversation with Sir Piers and the Duttons, touching their midnight ride to Stafford, and its results. The deputy guildmaster had accompanied them, and obtained leave to examine the prisoner, whose witness agreed on every point with that of Skelhorne. There could no longer exist a doubt of Sir Roger's guilt, and now the next consideration was, how to deal with him. The guildmaster, who was old and timid, having heard from his deputy the state of affairs, hastened to solicit an interview with Lord Audeley, and earnestly prayed that the matter might be hushed up.

This the Baron indignantly refused to sanction; nor was the meek Bishop Reginald less decided as to the duty of prosecuting so flagrant a criminal. He even undertook to lay the matter in a day or two before the Bishop of Lichfield and Coventry, whose diocese, be it remembered, then included the county of

Chester. The Cardinal Primate was, it was well-known, a zealous advocate for Church reform, and he, Lord Audeley, confidently hoped, would lend a helping hand towards the punishment, or at least the expulsion, of the offender. The discussion was brief but satisfactory, and Piers undertook to write all needful particulars respecting it to Sir Armine, and to despatch the letter next day by the hand of Hal Nixon, whose secrecy he could entirely depend upon. The guildmaster, finding himself thus overruled, was fain to console himself with fierce attacks on the venison pasty, and with plentiful potations of Lord Audeley's excellent sack.

None of these harassing discussions reached Sir Ranulph's ears. His last anxiety respecting his grandchildren's future prospects had been set at rest by Letitia's acceptance of the post offered her in the Queen's nursery, and by Lady Kynderton's written promise of watching over her as she would over her own child. And henceforward his undivided thoughts were fixed on God and on the unseen awful state, inscrutable to the eye of sense, yet near to every one of us. The absence of Sir Armine was a severe loss to him at this time; for the

confessor into whose hands he fell was narrow-minded and severe, bigoted as to outward observances, but unskilled to minister to a mind ill at ease. His presence had a visible effect in depressing the aged knight, and many times Cecily and Lettice wept to see that voluntary penances, the scourge, the haircloth shirt, the broken sleep, were added to his burden of pain and infirmity.

‘Forgive me, dear father,’ Cecily wrote to Sir Armine; ‘you have oftentimes told me not to lean on man, nor on man’s wit and wisdom, and truly I do strive to stay myself on God alone, and commit my dear grandfather to Him; yet, think I sometimes, if you were here, his vexed soul might find rest; if that may not be, I beseech you slack not your intercessions for him. I misgive me our Easter will not be a joyful one; but would fain have others rejoice, and therefore enclose a golden angel,* praying you distribute it among the poor lepers in the spital; ’twill add something to their dinner, poor caitiffs!’

It might add something to Cecily’s weariness of spirit during the ensuing week that she

* A coin worth 6s. 8d. in the first year of Henry VI.

saw little or nothing of Sir Piers. He was engaged in visiting, and, according to the Duke of York's instructions, 'sounding' such of the Staffordshire gentlemen as were thought to be well affected to his cause. They were not numerous, but very stanch, and at this moment in a state of increased irritation against Queen Margaret and her supporters, from having heard of the fresh honours heaped on the Duke of Somerset. They justly regarded these as so many public insults to Richard of York, and longed that he should come forward and openly assert his claim to the throne. They were, therefore, somewhat disappointed to learn from Sir Piers that he had no intention of doing this, but merely assembled an army to secure his personal safety, and intimidate the Queen into a change of ministers. Moderation, in those rude days, was a virtue that gained its possessor little credit; and scarcely one in ten of the Duke's friends honoured him as he deserved for his horror of bloodshed, and deep reverence towards his anointed King. Sir Piers was of great use in setting his master's views in their true light, and in putting the Yorkist gentlemen in communication with one another. It was determined that each should collect and arm his

retainers, and be ready at the shortest notice to join the Duke either at Wigmore or any other place he should appoint. The knight spent two days at the Halsteds, occupied in ordering his affairs and preparing for the worst; and it was not till late on Maundy Thursday that he was able to return to Lichfield.

As he rode through the town he could not but observe that all eyes were upon him, and that his appearance was hailed with general satisfaction. Some remarks that came to his ear, and the sight of many Trowtbecke men-at-arms hanging about the streets and swarming round the hostel where he and his followers also put up, made it clear that the intended joust between him and Adam de Trowtbecke had been publicly announced. He was therefore not surprised, on alighting at the palace, to find his rival added to the number of Lord Audeley's guests at supper. His father, Sir William, a bluff, burly personage, was also there. Before him stood the baron's magnificent peg-tankard (so called from the pegs inside it, measuring half a pint each): it was made of massive silver, and supported by twelve figures of the Apostles, of exquisite workmanship: the lid was richly chased, and surmounted

by a representation of St. George and the Dragon. When filled, as now, to the brim with foaming ale, it taxed the strength of Maurice's young arm to lift it. He was in the act of doing so to replenish Sir William's goblet, the jovial old chamberlain expatiating meanwhile on the amber-like clearness of the ale, and exalting its virtues as eloquently as Falstaff was supposed to have done those of sack forty years before. But he broke off this harangue on Sir Piers' entrance, a circumstance of which his son's flashing eye and rising colour informed him speedily. Setting down the goblet, the old knight eyed him of the 'greyhound' attentively; apparently the result of the scrutiny was satisfactory, for he nodded to the baron, then, with stentorian strength of lungs and huge out-stretched hand, called Sir Piers to him.

'I' faith, a proper man—a proper, goodly man!' he said, complacently. 'I have heard of your quarrel with my son, sir, and am come thus far to see it voided! If he can vanquish you, 'twill be a jewel in his cap, sir—a jewel of no mean price; nay, frown not, son Adam, I will have no ill blood betwixt two lads of mettle.'

‘Heaven knows, Sir William,’ said the Knight of Holforde, ‘I bear no grudge towards this young gentleman. Not against me, but against the noble Duke to whom I owe my spurs, hath he uttered words of railing; and the Lord of Audeley, before whom I laid the matter, doth opine, as all honourable men must do, that such words cannot be passed by unatoned.’

‘Certes they cannot,’ cried the baron; ‘and if thou wert capable of drawing back from such a quarrel, Piers, I would chop off thy spurs myself. But let nought be done in malice. We ourselves, Sir William, will see the lists erected in the market-place; I have paced it already, and find there is ample space and verge enough for the combat.’

‘Good, good,’ said the chamberlain, rubbing his hands. ‘’Twill bring our young days back, my lord, to see a joust once more; ay, thou mayst smile, young gentleman-usher, but I was once lithe and slim as a willow-wand (come, fill my goblet, youngster), and could take part in a joust, (who would set the best wine Vernon ever grew against such ale as this?) ay, and come off victor, too. ’Twas at the siege of Melun, Sir Piers; your father and I fought

side by side against that beleaguered town. The besieged were obstinate and would not yield; so King Harry of Agincourt bade us undermine the walls. We did so, but the foe discovered our intent and balked it. One day we heard a noise, as of rats burrowing i' the earth, and lo, a stroke of my pickaxe—for esquire and serf worked together there—brought down the thin wall of earth between us, and we stood face to face with the Frenchmen! We stared at one another a space, by the light of our torches; then, how the merry-hearted varlets made the vault ring with laughter at our begrimed faces and soiled condition! From that day forward that dark den became a sort of lists, and many knightly feats of arms were performed there. King Hal himself dared the Duke of Burgundy to single combat, and actually did break a lance with the Sieur de Barbazan. All was done in courtesy, and these jousts were publicly proclaimed to the armies by all the bells in Melun ringing. Your father, Sir Piers, was greatly commended by King Hal for his skill in jousting; but, alas! when the poor Frenchmen came to be starving, and scant measure of horseflesh was all their food, their hands waxed weak, and the strife unequal.'

So they talked, of tilts and tournaments, of the recent joust of Charlemagne's tree, in which one Burgundian gentleman had dared every knight in every court of Christendom to break a lance with him, and of the noble-hearted Chevalier Jacques de Lalaing, who wandered through France, Spain, Portugal, and Scotland in search of heroic adventures, and whose recent death had made a gap in the ranks of chivalry never to be replaced.

Maurice and Letitia felt their Burgundian blood stir within them at these recitals; and the latter treasured them up for the benefit of Cecily, whom duty and inclination alike kept at her grandfather's side.

The party was broken up by Lord Audeley at an earlier hour than altogether suited the convivial chamberlain. The morrow, Good Friday, was a day of solemn stillness, church bells and organs being alike mute, and no sound heard through the cathedral but the awful monotonous tones of the Miserere and the rustle of pilgrims' garments, as they painfully dragged themselves on their knees to the feet of a gigantic crucifix set up in the nave. The soothing influences of the day—

When Christ of purple did His banner sprede
On Calvarye, abroad upon the Roode,
To save mankynde,

reached even to Sir Ranulph on his sick bed, and were a meet prelude to the holy calm of Easter-eve. Before sunrise on Easter-day the whole city was moved, and came forth in festive garb for the services of the forenoon. In the afternoon it had been announced that, 'for the increase of good devotion and holsome doctrin, a play, and declaration of divers storyes in the Bible, beginning with the *Fall of Lucifer* and ending with the *Day of Doom*, should be rehearsed and played, at the cost of the crafts of the city.' Hours before the time, an immense crowd had collected outside the west gate of the Close, where, for the convenience of the clerks and monks attached to the minster, Don Henry had caused his stage to be prepared. This stage, or pageant, as it was called, was 'a tall building, with a higher and lower room, open on all sides, and set upon four wheels,' so as to be drawn easily from place to place. As three o'clock struck, the Lord of Audeley and his friends having taken their places on a kind of balcony over the west gate, the play began. It was acted

by the tradesmen of the city, under Don Henry's superintendence, and consisted of short dialogues or conversations in the rudest imaginable verse, supposed to be carried on by Scriptural personages. The actors, however, made no attempt to carry out the illusion by imitating Eastern dress or scenery, Abraham, Balak, and King Herod, who figured in the first day's pageant, being all arrayed in parti-coloured surcoats with slashed sleeves and peaked shoes; and Sarah and Rebecca coming forth in horned head-gear and satin 'court-pies.'*

The dialogues were freely interlarded with remarks addressed to the audience and responded to by them. A copy of them is still preserved in the British Museum, and cannot be perused without astonishment at the mixture they present of solemn scriptural truth with the lowest buffoonery. Many fabulous incidents are mingled with the sacred story, some of a coarse and revolting nature; these, however, the spectators are permitted 'to take in sport,' as 'not being warranted by any writt.' The marvel is that persons of refinement or education could tolerate and even

* 'A kind of short cloak.'—STRUTT.

enjoy the 'mystery plays,' as we read they did; and we can only suppose that the few grains of Divine truth they contained outweighed bushels of legendary chaff. As for the populace, they were alternately impressed with awe and moved to shouts of boisterous laughter. No scene was more enthusiastically received than one of 'Noe and his Shippe,' in which Noah's wife resolutely declines going into the ark, adding—

'Withouten faile I will not out,
Out of this town;
But (unless) I have my gossippes every each one,
One foote further I will not gone.'

Her 'gossippes' and she are represented as drowning their fears of 'the flood flitting in full fast' in

A pottill of malmsey, goode and stronge,
Which will rejoyce both harte and tongue.

Her sons, Japhet and Shem, at last force her into the 'shippe,' just as it begins to be lifted off the earth; and Noe exclaims in consternation—

'Over the lande the water spredes;
God doe as He will !'

We must not linger over these details; suffice it to give one more specimen of the *Chester Play*, a few lines from the prologue to the *Day*

of *Doom*, so solemn in their simplicity, that few of the audience could hear them unmoved.

The coming of Christe to give eternal judgemente,
 You weavers, last of all, your parte is to playe.
 Domesday we call it, when the Omnipotent
 Shall make end of this world, by sentence, I saye.

On His right hand to stand, God grant *us* that daye,
 And to have that sweete worde in melodye,
 Come hither, come hither, ' Venite, Benedicti !'

To which rest of wayes and endless habitation
 Grant us free passage, that together wee,
 Accompanied with angells and endless delectation,
 May continuallye laude God, and prayse that King
 of Glorye.

' Amen !' said Lord Audeley, fervently ; then, half-ashamed of his own emotion, he withdrew, after unbonneting to the players. ' Ye have played well and lustily, my masters, and set these mysteries before us to our lively comfort ; now forth with you to the High Cross, where the worshipful Guild await your coming. A fair good even to all.'

No state prisoner ever listened to the preparations for erecting his scaffold with more trepidation than did Cecily to the sounds of hammering heard in the market-place on Easter Monday morning. There the lists were being prepared under the critical eyes of Lord Audeley,

and of the Earl of Worcester, who had returned to Lichfield after a week's absence, to be present at the expected trial of arms. The lists were square, and enclosed by a strong double palisade; at the north and south ends were doorways leading into the two tents prepared for the combatants. These tents were small, but of rich material, Adam de Trowtbecke's being covered with striped damask, blue and white. He had chosen for the motto, embroidered round it in large letters, 'Disdayne answereth disdayne.' Sir Piers' tent was white, with the device, 'Constancie, Devocyon,' chosen, I need hardly say, by him as a covert allusion to the initials of Cecily Done. On the right side of the lists a platform richly decked with tapestry was prepared for the Baron, as arbiter of the fight, and for his numerous friends. A strong body of armed townsmen occupied the space between the two palisades, and guarded the arena of combat. It was thickly strewn with sand, and open, as was the platform also, to the blue and cloudless sky.

The minster clock tolled three, and all was ready for the encounter. The umpire was in his place, with a bright assemblage of knights and ladies round him. Eglanbie Trowtbecke

sat on one side of him, proud and calm ; Cecily on the other, for her grandfather, feeling unusually strong and cheerful, had insisted on her being present at the joust. She, too, was outwardly calm, though her heart beat as fast as that of a newly caught wood-pigeon. The sight of the lists themselves, of the eight men-at-arms, with white wands in their hands, standing within them, and of the thousands of spectators, clustering even on the house-tops, appalled her at first ; but all fear vanished, and the throbbings of her bosom were those of pride and delight, as, at the sound of a bugle, her knight, new-shriven, rode into the arena. He wore a rich, but not fantastic suit of armour, and round his neck the collar of SS. and a chaplet of mother-of-pearl made at Jerusalem. His sword was also of Oriental fashion, and exceedingly beautiful, though somewhat dented by frequent use. It was an heirloom from crusading ancestors, and round the hilt was a narrow white scarf, on which the words ' Christi crux est mea lux ' were embroidered in golden hair. He rode slowly to the foot of the platform, dismounted, and bowed reverently to the Baron and those around him.

Adam de Trowtbecke now came forth, in gay

and gallant trim, in all the beauty of perfect proportion and youthful strength. His helmet was adorned with a rich border of pearls, and over the forehead was engraven 'JESU NAZARENUS REX.*' Like Sir Piers, he rode at once to the platform and dismounted. There, kneeling on one knee, he prayed the Baron, but in a clear and somewhat haughty voice, to confer upon him the honour of knighthood. Lord Audeley came down the tapestried flight of steps which led from the platform to the lists, and, by a grave bend of the head, signified his assent to the petition. Then the heir of Trowtbecke drew his sword from the sheath, kissed it, and placed it in the Baron's hand. A light but firm stroke descended on his shoulder, and made his corslet clatter; the Baron raised him from the ground, and said aloud—

'In the name of God, our Lady, and good St. George rise, Sir Knight.'

The combatants took their places, Maurice Done acting as esquire to Sir Piers, and a young Clifford undertaking that office towards the heir of Trowtbecke. Mistress

* See ORMEROD, vol. ii. p. 27, *Monuments of the Trowtbeckes*.

Egланbie's swarthy page sounded a horn, the heralds cried, 'Do your devoir!' and the fight began.

It were tedious to tell the various turns of fate in this first encounter of the knights, and what wonderful sagacity and training their horses displayed, seeming to divine the various risks their masters ran, and to obey the very slightest touch of the bridle. Sir Adam, for so we must now call him, wore, according to the newest fashion of armour in that day, 'roundels,' or little wings of steel, attached to his wrists, elbows, and shoulders. So accurate, and so rapidly dealt were the blows of his adversary, who invariably aimed at those joints of his armour, and caught the roundels on the point of his lance, that, to his bitter mortification, he was not once able to return Sir Piers' strokes. Cursing in his heart the vanity that had led him to put on this suit, he looked entreatingly up towards the Baron. Lord Audeley saw and pitied his dilemma, and by a sign of his white wand arrested the combat. The obnoxious roundels were easily taken off, and, to Egланbie's relief, the fight recommenced with increased ardour.

Time passed on, blood flowed, but not the

heart's blood of either knight. More than a score of lances lay shivered on the sand; and Lord Audeley, seeing that neither party had gained a decided advantage, thought it high time to stop the fray.

'You have done well, bold knights, well and nobly,' he said, throwing down his white wand into the lists. 'It is enough.'

Sir Piers, as a true knight should, submitted at once to the Baron's arbitrement, and riding up to Adam de Trowtbecke, offered him his hand; but it was petulantly rejected.

'Lord of Audeley,' cried the fiery youth, turning towards the dais, 'as you tender your own honour, I beseech you, nay, I require of you, to grant me one more trial of arms. Bid this proud knight dismount, and meet me on foot, battle-axe in hand.'

'Your prayer is against the laws of chivalry,' replied the Baron, dryly; 'nevertheless, as you adjure me by mine honour, I dare not say you nay. Sir Piers, what is your pleasure in this matter? The decision thereof, and the choice of weapons, rest with you.'

'Be it then, my lord, as Sir Adam de Trowtbecke craveth; an encounter on foot, our weapon the battle-axe—and lose we not an

instant, for our shadows lengthen on the sand.'

A few moments sufficed to wash the blood from the warriors' slight wounds, to make such changes in their accoutrements as the change of weapons rendered needful, and last, not least, to refresh them with a cup of spiced wine.

They then re-appeared, each bearing in his right hand a heavy sword, and in his left a battle-axe. The weapons had been carefully proved by Lord Audeley himself, and pronounced to be according to the rules of the fight. Each warrior wore a small heart-shaped shield on his left arm, and a dagger in his girdle. They first attacked one another with their swords, but with balanced success. Then they drew off their shields and flung them at one another's feet, each hoping to make the other stumble. But they were too wary to be thus surprised, and, seizing their battle-axes, they fell to work with them in terrible earnest. Young Trowtbecke, seeing that Sir Piers' visor was up, aimed repeatedly and with desperate energy at his face. He missed that, but succeeded in fracturing the shoulder-piece, and disabling the left arm. Sir Piers, with consummate skill, still parried his attacks with

the right, and availing himself of an instant's pause, dealt such a blow at his helmet as made the rash youth reel; his battle-axe slipped from his hand, and he was for the moment at his foe's mercy. Sir Piers stooped to pick up the weapon, and returned it to Adam de Trowtbecke. As he did so, vehement shouts of applause, and cries of 'A Holforde! a Holforde!' greeted him from all sides. By universal acclaim he was pronounced victor, and Lord Audeley, rising from the dais, declared the joust at an end. He uttered in brief but emphatic words, an encomium on both the combatants; and his opinion being a law to the multitude, they echoed it by giving one cheer for the heir of Trowtbecke.

Yes, the joust was at an end, and the crowds who had looked on breathlessly were now hurrying home. They poured along the narrow streets, or across the Langton Causeway, still excited, and raising as they went such shouts for the Knight of Holforde as startled the wild-fowl on the Minster pool. Nay, even the old grey walls of the minster itself found themselves faintly, and as it were against their conscience, echoing back the voice of human applause. Sir Piers was the popular idol at

this moment, for his gallantry, his unaffected bearing, and his kindness to the fallen; but perhaps the circumstance that had won him most favour, was his having fought with vizard up; a practice rarely ventured upon, on account of its obvious peril, but thought especially knightly in that age. To him the risk had been more than made up for by the sight it procured him of Cecily's face, earnestly bending towards him, now glowing, now pale with shivering fear. So had he seen her when, rashly perhaps, he had stooped to restore the battle-axe to his foe; but when, at the moment of his triumph, he looked again, she was no longer there. Lettice's place was empty too, and, stranger still, his young esquire Maurice had retreated into the tent, and did not advance to meet him, but stood silent and with drooping brow. The truth flashed upon Piers at once, even before Maurice, hiding his face on his cousin's shoulder, had time to say—

‘O, Piers, our grandfather is dying! let us haste to him ere it be too late.’

‘My poor Maurice! and thou hast waited for me!’ exclaimed the knight. ‘Hie thee home at once; myself will follow, tarrying but to wipe off this blood and dust.’

‘ Could I leave my post ? ’ asked Maurice, raising his head.

He poured out some water from a silver ewer, and with deft fingers washed away all outward traces of the struggle. As for the hurt received from Sir Adam’s battle-axe, Sir Piers would not hear of having it looked to just then, though old Parnel, sent by Cecily, appeared at the tent-door armed with surgical instruments, and with ‘ spermaceti for an inward bruise.’

Even her loquacity was subdued by the shock just received, and she made way silently for the Lords Audeley and Worcester, who entered the tent ; the former wrung Sir Piers’ hand, half in congratulation, half in sympathy.

‘ How long have you known of this ? ’ Piers inquired, in the hushed voice with which we speak of impending death.

‘ Scarce an hour,’ replied the Baron. ‘ While on his knees in the oratory he sank, overpowered by a deadly faintness. Mistress Parnel’s restoratives have called the flickering spirit back for a moment, but for a moment only.’

While thus talking, they walked rapidly towards the Close.

‘And Cecily?’ asked Sir Piers.

‘Poor child,’ said the Baron, ‘we hid the truth from her awhile, for her heart and soul were in the lists with thee, and the strife just then looked perilous; but when a second messenger sought me on the dais, bringing ill tidings, we could no longer conceal them. As arbiter of the joust, I durst not quit my post; but this good Earl with his train guarded her and the child Lettice back to Sir Ranulph’s chamber-door. Lettice was sorely overborne with this sudden grief, poor little one.’

‘Her sister did whisper comfort in her ear, though with white, quivering lips,’ added Lord Worcester; ‘and did succeed in part in allaying the passionateness of her sorrow.’

He was interrupted by the first toll of the passing-bell. It pealed loud and clear from the cathedral-yard, reminding all who heard it of their own mortality, and stirring them up to a charitable prayer for the parting soul. Like an electric shock, it thrilled through all hearts, and hushed the hum and excitement which still pervaded the town. The tramp of footsteps, and the last lingering shouts for ‘a Holforde’ died into silence; and now you could hear distinctly the trickling of an April shower that

was beginning to fall, and the hoarse cawing of flights of rooks and daws that circled round the minster spires. At the Close gate young Hamo accosted his master with the good news that Sir Armine had arrived, and was in the sick knight's chamber. Moved by the contents of Cecily's and Sir Piers' letters, he had only waited to complete the services of Easter-day and to provide for those of the ensuing week, and then hastened to his dying friend. Hal Nixon accompanied him, and they had ridden since early morning, only halting once to refresh their weary nags.

This was comfort, solid comfort; and knowing Cecily and her grandfather in such good hands, Sir Piers could wait patiently, though with intense anxiety, for admission to the sick room. Maurice paced the corridor in feverish restlessness till Lettice appeared, and softly crept up to him.

'He is without pain, and restful,' she said; 'he recogniseth all, and his eyes seek ours lovingly; he will call for us anon, Sir Armine saith.'

Silence again, till the door re-opened, and Sir Piers was beckoned to. After short conference, he returned with flushed cheek and a strange gleam of joy in his dark eyes.

‘My Maurice,’ he said, ‘go quickly, and bid the Lords of Audeley and Worcester to the chapel; thy grandfather’s bidding forestalls the prayer I dared not utter, and grants me Cecily for my wife this hour.’

Joyfully did Maurice spring up to perform the errand. Half an hour later the doors of the sick chamber had been thrown open to admit Sir Ranulph’s friends and servants; the arras hangings which screened it off from the chapel had been drawn aside. The altar, with its richly embroidered covering, the lighted tapers, the choristers, white and noiseless as spirits from another world, were there; awful, by contrast, was the twilight gloom around the death-bed, relieved by the light of a tiny lamp which hung by a silver chain from the ceiling. Its flame flickered in the breeze that streamed through an open window, and threw a dim wavering light upon Sir Ranulph’s ashy face. He lay, or rather sat, propped up by many cushions; his hands folded, his eyes closed sometimes, but oftener raised to heaven, or fixed on his children with unquenched intelligence and love. And now the chantry priest rose from his knees by Sir Ranulph’s side, and took his station at the altar. Sir Piers entered

the chapel in complete armour, and accompanied by Maurice and Lord Worcester. Lord Audeley followed, armed also, and leading Cecily by the hand. A veil of purest white had been hastily adjusted over her fair head, and hung down nearly to the ground. Lettice, and young Anne, and Elinour Dutton clustered round her, still arrayed in the rich dresses they had worn at the joust. And now the marriage service was chanted, in subdued and thrilling tones, and the marriage benediction was given, and Sir Ranulph raised his head and firmly said, 'Amen.' No joyous peal from tower or spire proclaimed that Piers and Cecily were one in life and death, but the passing-bell tolled on, measured and slow as the breathings of the dying knight. A humble entreaty for pardon from any of his servants or children whom he might have grieved or hurt, a few low words of trust and peace, a blessing pronounced on his three orphans, and a peculiar emphasis of blessing on Cecily—these were his farewells to earth and time; and so the last prayer was prayed, and the last breath drawn, and his children, mournfully clinging together, knelt on by the bedside, and felt that for them the struggle of life had indeed begun.

CHAPTER X.

OF THE FIRST BATTLE.

He is come to ope
The purple testament of bleeding war.

SHAKSPEARE.

Fondly we seek the dawning bloom
On features wan and fair.

KEBLE.

LIFE has been truly compared* to the dark crypt of some glorious cathedral. We grope our way through shadows, lighted by the lamp of Faith, and often through our heedlessness, or the chill damp of the atmosphere, that lamp burns dimly. Then our hearts sink within us; yet all the while there is light and beauty and melody overhead, and if we watch for them, we may catch from time to time some faint notes of that melody, and see some gleams of that light. They become specially distinct as one by one those who have walked

* LONGFELLOW'S *Kavanagh*.

by our side are admitted to the radiant choir, and we look wistfully after them, and, as the door uncloses to receive them, the splendour and the harmony flash in for a moment. Such gleams are granted by the All-Merciful to gild those first moments of bereavement which otherwise poor human nature could scarcely bear; and when they have passed away, the unselfish mourner treasures up the remembrance of them, and walks in its light, hopefully and thankfully.

Something of this comfort was felt by Sir Ranulph's grandchildren during the first days of absolute retirement which followed his death. The good chantry priest was at hand to guide their 'mourning fancies wild,' to chide Lettice's impatient sorrow, to brace Cecily for the performance of new tasks in life, to remind young Maurice, in his high but self-confident resolves for the future, that only by self-denial could those resolves bear the fruit of knightly deeds. Moreover, he proved himself a sound and wholesome adviser in temporal matters.

These now wore an anxious and complicated aspect. On Easter Tuesday a messenger from the royal palace of Greenwich had arrived, bearing private dispatches for Lord Audeley.

Their purport was to inform him that the Duke of York was known to be assembling a considerable army in the marches of Wales and the adjacent counties. What the destination of this army might be no one could positively tell; it was thought most probable that the Duke would march towards London, where his partisans were very numerous; and accordingly the Dukes of Somerset and Buckingham and many more were rallying round the King, and preparing to defend the metropolis from inward and outward foes. As, however, the north-western counties were also threatened, the King laid his commands on his trusty and well-beloved lieutenant in those parts, the Lord of Audeley, to put the shires of Stafford and Chester into a state of defence, and to be on the spot in case of their being invaded.

This left the Baron no choice but to retrace his steps northward, the which he was preparing to do, accompanied by Lady Dutton and her children. Sir Thomas and his brother, however, adhered to their original intention of going on to town, the former for business, the latter for amusement; and they willingly undertook to escort Letitia and Eglanbie to their destination at Court. Sir William Trowtbecke

had left Lichfield for Chester early on Easter Tuesday. Even his serenity, 'good, easy man,' had not been proof against the mortifying conclusion of the joust; and, with the rapid change of feeling incident to weak-minded people, he had vented his disappointment in reproaches and sarcasms which his fiery son could ill brook. They were engaged in hot debate when Eglanbie entered and announced the startling facts of Sir Ranulph's fatal seizure, and the marriage of Piers and Cecily. This fresh blow filled up the measure of young Adam's mortification; and so vehement was the explosion it caused, that the old chamberlain was startled. He had not imagined his son capable of so strong an attachment; he had never enjoyed his confidence, and knew not how he had buoyed himself up with the hope of obtaining Cecily, as soon as her grandfather's death should put her under the guardianship of the Crown. So he sat in astounded silence, till the storm of passion had spent itself. Silently and sullenly the youth then returned to his hostel, and ere sunrise the next morning he and his followers had left Lichfield. No one could tell which direction they had taken.

Sir Piers was in a less enviable state of mind than his defeated rival perhaps imagined. He felt that the time was now come when it was his duty openly to declare himself, and to join the Duke of York. True, that Prince had himself appointed the 3rd of May as the time, and London as the place of their meeting, but matters had changed their aspect since then. Fresh affronts and wrongs had been heaped on the Duke by those who mistook his gentleness for want of power, and it became incumbent on such as loved him to take his part decidedly. Honour and gratitude, therefore, urged Piers to hasten to Wigmore Castle as soon as the last mournful offices should have been performed over the remains of his adoptive father.

The duty could hardly have pressed upon him at a more inconvenient moment, for a large amount of business had been suddenly thrown upon his hands by Sir Ranulph's death; but this consideration was as nothing compared with the anxiety he felt to provide for Cecily's safety during his unavoidable absence. Newbolde Manor would perhaps be the most secure abode he could choose for her; but, then, how utterly lonely would she feel there, parted

from husband, sister, and brother, and left to brood over memories of the dead and disquietudes for the living! No, that must not be! Helegh Castle, Dutton, and other houses were at all times open to her; but her independent spirit, and his, too, shrank from trespassing for any length of time on the hospitality even of tried friends. Cecily's own inclination pointed to the Halsteds; and she pleaded hard to be allowed to establish herself there. With Hal Nixon for bailiff, and Gillian (as his wife) to help her in the dairy and farm, she thought she could do wonders! The gentlewomen of that day (as any one may convince himself by reading the *Paston Papers*) were no mere puppets, but sensible, practical managers, capable, many of them, of ruling, not a house only, but large estates, with economy and liberality combined. Such a manager it was Cecily's secret ambition to become, all the more from a hidden consciousness that hitherto her taste had been for dreamy and desultory pursuits. Piers had always been very indulgent to these pursuits, nay, had loved to share them in his brief moments of leisure; and now she would show her sense of this kindness by the most diligent

attention to his interests. But these castles in the air quickly vanished; Piers himself was unwillingly compelled to demolish them, the lawless state of the country at that time rendering the Halsteds an unsafe residence in the absence of himself and most of his able-bodied tenants.

These anxious discussions had not hitherto reached Lettice's ears, but when they did, they were received by her with a fresh burst of grief. Lettice's bright, determined spirit seemed for the time quite crushed. The introduction at Court, which Eglanbie Trowtbecke's glowing descriptions had taught her to anticipate with delight, had now become distasteful; and she turned away from Eglanbie herself, her former beau-ideal of beauty and wit, as we turn from the touch of a brilliant icicle. This revulsion of feeling brought her nearer than ever to Cecily, and she wept so bitterly at the thought of an immediate parting, that Cecily's heart melted within her.

'Dear Piers,' she said to her husband, after much cogitation, 'suffer me, I pray you, to go with my Lettice to London, and commend her myself to the motherly care of the Lady Kynderton; when that is done, I would, so

please you, betake myself to St. Mary's nunnery at Clerkenwell, where as a child I passed many happy days with my dear mother. The good nuns will be fain to see me, I know; and in that green and quiet retirement I could pray for you, Piers, till such time as you shall recall me to your side.'

'Unto which good time God bring us quickly,' answered the knight; and so the matter was settled, to Letitia's infinite relief. The day after the joust, the Earl of Worcester had taken his departure for Italy, and on Thursday in Easter week the party in the Episcopal Palace broke up. The body of Sir Ranulph, which had been laid in the chapel with taper and requiem, and watched by, through the last night, by his sorrowing children, was now placed on a litter, and began its mournful journey into Cheshire. Lord Audeley, Maurice, and Sir Piers accompanied it, the last-mentioned taking with him a strong body of retainers, both as a mark of respect to the dead, and in order to save delay by proceeding at once from the Manor to Wigmore. The chantry priest was of course one of the funeral procession.

It were easier for you to imagine than for

me to describe the bitterness of the partings that morning ; how Lettice twined her arms round Maurice's neck, and could hardly let him go ; how Sir Piers looked back to the Minster gate, where his young wife stood, and felt that life had acquired new value in his eyes ; how Cecily waved a last farewell, then turned into the cathedral to weep and pray ; how Lettice wept, but could not pray, for sorrow was strong in her young heart, and faith was weak.

The heavy day passed away, however, as all heavy days do ; and the night, which was all but sleepless to Cecily, brought soothing rest to the sister, round whom her arms were clasped. Next morning, the party were up betimes, and ready equipped for their journey southwards. They rode as before, Cecily attended by Hamo and Hal Nixon, Lettice by two Done retainers and by good Parnel, who was to remain with her at Court ; so Cecily had ordered, well knowing that, in spite of some eccentricities, the faithful creature would be a real protection and comfort in the untried world upon which Lettice was about to enter.

The first day or two the poor girl rode by her sister's side, with drooping head, scarcely

able to smile at Sir Thomas Dutton's frequent quips and cranks, or to observe the scenery round, which indeed had gradually become flat and uninteresting. But such a state of things could not last long at fifteen; and as they entered upon a totally new country, Lettice's attention was roused, and she began to observe and enjoy what passed around her. The immense pastures, dotted with thousands of sheep, whose wool was then a staple article of commerce in the midland counties; the enclosed parks full of magnificent timber, the property of peers and prelates; the city of Coventry, with its cathedral and priory, often resorted to by King Henry in his progresses,—these were objects of interest. Further south, the chalk range of Bedfordshire hills, glittering in sunshine, came in view; and then, by way of contrast, the green expanse of Whittlebury Forest, seen at a distance, refreshed the eye. Each night (for they proceeded leisurely, time being no pressing object, and travelling after sunset by no means safe) they slept at some hostel, or at the mansion of some hospitable acquaintance. The Duttons and Eglanbie Trowtbecke were welcome additions to society wherever they went. Our two sisters, of course, were held

excused, by their recent loss and deep mourning weeds, from mixing with strangers; but they met with much kindness; and even zealous Lancastrians, to whose ears the name of Piers Holforde was no welcome sound, and who, scarce a month later, met him in fierce struggle on the battle-field, showed willing courtesy to his gentle bride.

Our travellers reached St. Albans on the 30th of April, the eve of St. Philip and St. James's day. People, in those rude times, were generally too deeply immersed in care and strife to have a disengaged eye for the picturesque. Nevertheless, the whole party, even Eglanbie herself, looked up in wondering awe towards the venerable town. It was then composed of narrow, straggling streets, winding up the side of a steep eminence. The immense cross-shaped church, six hundred feet long, crowned the summit, and covered the 'flowery hill' where beams of glory were said to have streamed upward from St. Alban's grave.

Close by stood the monastery, a vast battle-mented pile of most imposing appearance, worthy to be the 'premier' abbey of England.

Our travellers caught but an imperfect glimpse of it as it fronted the south side of the hill, but the sound of its deep-toned bell boomed through the evening air solemnly.

They crossed the river of Verulam, and passed the site of Kingsbury, Saxon Edgar's favourite residence. Then they began to ascend Fishpool-street, so called from the green flat on its right, which had once been covered with water, and rode through the narrow and dirty streets till they reached the 'Chequer' hostel, in Holywell-lane. Here they dismounted, and entered a hall where a large and motley assemblage of travellers were already at supper. So noisy and disorderly were they, that Sir Thomas, though, as he said, 'nothing queasy for himself,' proposed to his young companions to adjourn to the neighbouring hostel of the 'Key.' On hearing this, however, the trim and glib-spoken hostess of the 'Chequer' bestirred herself, and smoothing her snow-white 'barmecloth,' or apron, invited them to follow her into a less crowded apartment. It was a long, low room, ceiled and panelled with oak, with an oriel window looking towards the abbey at the furthest end.

Two men sat in this recess, talking together in earnest whispers. Their figures were not clearly discernible in the dim twilight, but there was something in the voice of one of the speakers which riveted Eglanbie Trowtbecke's attention. Seeing her beautiful head frequently turned that way with ill-repressed curiosity, John Dutton suggested that the strangers should be asked to join their party. He stepped daintily towards the oriel as ambassador to the rest, and thus accosted them :—

‘ Fair sirs, if ye mislike not the society of these my co-travellers, the Lady Holforde and her sister, Mistress Eglanbie Trowtbecke, and the worshipful Knight of Dutton, I pray you make one with us at our evening refection, and partake of these conserved fruits, and this potted wild-fowl we have brought from the north. To the which,’ he added, seeing the hostess enter, ‘ shall be added hypocras and mead of fair Mistress Joyce's concocting, and wafers piping hot from her oven.’

The two strangers rose, and advanced towards the party. The shorter of them, a plain man of about five-and-forty, habited as a London merchant, but with the slouching shoulders

and sunk, dim eyes of a student, replied simply:—

‘Thanks, sir, and gentles all; myself have supped already, and am, besides, too dust-stained and travel-wearied to be fit company for your nobility. I am plain William Caxton, of the Mercers’ guild, and awaiting a summons from the Lord Abbot here, who desireth to see my wares.’

‘Your wares, good Master Mercer?’ inquired John Dutton, glancing first at his own apparel, from which every speck of dust had just been brushed, and then at a certain square chest that stood near Master Caxton; ‘anything new at court, either in shape or texture?’

‘My wares,’ replied Caxton, smiling, ‘are not what your worship supposes.* I have travelled much in the Low Countries and Germany, and dealt largely in missals and fair blazonings. At Mentz I have consorted with Faust and Guttenberg, men which are adepts in the new mystery of imprinting, and

* ‘It is very probable that mercers in those days were general merchants, trading in all sorts of rich goods, and that even books formed a part of their traffic.’—CHALMERS’ *Biographical Dictionary*, vol. viii. p. 507.

they have sent by me to the learned Abbot of St. Albans a marvellous specimen of their art.'

So saying, he opened the chest, and with the fond delight with which a mother lifts her baby from its cradle, took out a large book, bound in carved oak boards. He unclasped it with reverence, and exhibited the title-page of the famous 'Forty-six line Bible,' a Latin version of the Scriptures, beautifully printed on fair paper, from the first types ever cast in metal. Neither of the Duttons felt or affected any interest in this prodigy of art, for such it really was; but their apathy was made up for by the genuine enthusiasm of Cecily and Eglanbie. With a gratified smile, Caxton looked from one to the other, and said—

'By the help of God and His saints, we will have many such in England, fair dame and damosel, ere your bright locks be grey.'

'Would that my Lord of Worcester were here to see this sight,' exclaimed Cecily; 'it would rejoice him mightily.'

'He saw it but yesterday,' replied Caxton; 'he is the truest lover this new art hath, and often visiteth my poor den in Westminster to discourse of the progress thereof.'

The taller stranger drew near to examine the book. His aspect and clear olive complexion showed him a foreigner; his features were regular and beautiful, full of expression and acuteness, especially the thin, short upper lip and the deep-set eyes. These met Eglanbie's with a warning glance, as she was about to speak to him; the half-uttered 'Padre Fabrizio' died on her lips, and she looked down like a chidden child.

'And these be your talismans!' said the Italian, thoughtfully, handling a few types which Caxton had placed before them; 'marvellously small engines be these, to shake the whole globe withal! They, having of themselves neither speech nor language, shall yet pronounce an 'Ephphatha' in the ears of millions yet unborn! Say, Master Caxton, how long will it be ere the words of the divine Plato shall by this art be brought within reach of the poorest scholar?'

'Not long, I trust,' answered Caxton; 'prince of sages though he be, yet it is meet that his words should come second to those recorded in this volume. Here is the key to the door of life immortal!'

'A low and narrow door, truly,' murmured the Italian, with curling lip.

‘Yet the only one revealed to man,’ Master Caxton answered, meekly; ‘man’s true greatness lieth in lowliness.’

He shouldered the box with its precious contents, and departed, after making humble obeisance to the company. The Italian likewise took his leave, and shortly after the sisters and Eglanbie retreated to the only dormitory Parnel had been able to secure for them. It was a long, narrow, dreary apartment, at the top of the house, with walls scarcely three feet high, and a forest of oak-beams and rafters forming the high-pitched roof. The furniture of this chamber was scanty, and the beds so uninviting, that our travellers, though not over nice, preferred sitting up, wrapped in their hoods and mantles. They thought this no great hardship; and found occasion for mirth in their discomforts, and in Parnel’s despair and wrath at what she called ‘such a misusing of the nobility.’ Eglanbie especially, whom the sudden rencontre with her former preceptor had greatly excited, was little disposed for sleep. Seating herself opposite the latticed window, through which the stars gleamed faintly, she tried to collect her thoughts. She recalled her former intimacy

with Fabrizio, and the absorbing delight she had taken in the pursuits to which he had introduced her. It had been a justifiable delight at first, for the study of astrology had combined with it much knowledge of the mechanism of the heavens ; alchemy, too, had opened to her many wonders of natural history, chemical secrets, since lost, and which our modern savans are trying to recover. So far might have been well ; but man may not with impunity look into the marvels of creation and ignore his Creator, and therefore Fabrizio's infidel spirit poisoned every research. Alchemy naturally led to magic, the belief in which was then universal, though few women ventured to practise it.* Eglanbie had entered this unhallowed region secretly and with shuddering ; but its mysteries soon exercised a bewitching influence upon her, and made all household and ordinary duties appear utterly insipid. It was her neglect of these that had first drawn upon her the displeasure of the chamberlain ; then followed, as we have elsewhere narrated, Fabrizio's expulsion, and such

* Jaquetta, Duchess of Bedford, was an adept in the arts of magic, and brought it into vogue some years later in the Court of Edward IV.

a burst of wrath against herself that, trembling and overwhelmed, the haughty maiden was glad to appease it by an unconditional promise never to speak or correspond with Fabrizio more. Blank listlessness of mind had followed this excitement, and for many months weighed her down; but in Queen Margaret's Court she recovered her spring, and soon entered heart and soul into the political intrigues that abounded there. She devoted herself to the beautiful Queen with a passionate, exclusive love, which could scarcely brook a rival. She threw herself into the petty factions which split up the Court, had her political attachments and her political hatreds, and cherished the latter with a vehemence which perplexed and confounded her guardian the Baroness of Kynderton.

These new interests had put the old thoughts out of mind for a time; but the meeting with Fabrizio brought back the forgotten past with startling vividness. His evident wish to escape observation, and the fact that he no longer wore the dress or preserved the tonsure common to ecclesiastics, excited her curiosity; and, forgetful of the promise made to her father, she longed to speak with him once more. Her wish was speedily gratified.

‘How breathlessly hot is it here!’ Eglanbie suddenly exclaimed, as she and Cecily sat talking together in undertones. The previous day had been one of those oppressive ones which often visit us in April, and the sun’s rays on the steep roof had thoroughly heated their garret chamber. Its little window pertinaciously refused to open, and they had been obliged to bolt the door against intruders, the inn being full, Parnel said, of ‘roystering gallants, that kept their Pasque festival after a heathenish fashion.’ Their rude laughter and occasional brawls rang through our travellers’ attic, and added to their unrest. So did the loud breathing of old Parnel, whose discontents had gradually subsided into inarticulate mutterings, ending in sound sleep. Lettice had caught the infection, and lay in calm repose, her head pillowed on Cecily’s knee.

‘How hot it is!’ Eglanbie repeated, making one more attempt to unfasten the obdurate window. This proving vain, she took up the lamp to examine into the cause of a faint streak of light visible through one place in the wall. To her surprise she found a little door, which yielded at once to her touch. A stream of fresh air blew in her face, and, with a sensa-

tion of relief, she beckoned Cecily to the spot.

‘Anon,’ Cecily answered, pointing, with a smile, to the sleeping girl. So Eglanbie set down the lamp, stooped under the low doorway, and came forth on the edge of the tiled roof. The soft night breeze, the blue arch of heaven bending over her, the awful outline of church and abbey seen from that lonely pinnacle, were more like enchantment than reality. She looked up to the glittering stars, but they filled her with dread and perplexity, for she sought to read in their bright alphabet, not the glory of God, but her own future destiny. ‘Wherefore should I strive to pierce the gloom of futurity?’ she said, half aloud; ‘to me it cannot bring repose.’ She was turning back with a sigh, when her eye was caught by something of unnatural brightness in the western sky. An opposite gable hid out all but the skirts of this brightness, but it was observed from below, and passengers going along the dark streets stopped short, others joined them, and by degrees there was a hum and a gathering. The garden plot between the ‘Chequer’ and ‘Key’ filled with gazers, and a shrill voice was heard among the crowd exclaiming, ‘Good save us, the like hath not been beheld since

Shrewsbury fight!' With her usual impetuosity, Eglanbie looked round for some spot whence the strange appearance could be seen; she retraced her steps more rapidly than was safe to the little door, and thence to a point where the projecting gable that formed their dormitory joined the main body of the house. Here there was easy footing among the tiles, and the ascent of a few steps brought Eglanbie full in view of the western sky. A thick mist was floating on the horizon, and above that a dull red vapour, in the centre of which glowed and burned a cresset of most vivid light. Sometimes it remained still, and, as it were, veiled for a moment, then flashes of red light darted downwards from it, crossing one another like swords in deadly fray. It lit up tower and town with a lurid glare, and fell on the pale, upturned faces of the multitude. For the boldest, in that credulous age, it was a sight of fear, and Eglanbie's high courage quailed as the meteor shook its fiery tresses in her face.* The breeze seemed to have died away into a thundery stillness, and for a moment the pulsations of her proud heart died away also. Her head grew dizzy, and she was feel-

* This cresset was seen in many parts of England in the spring of 1455.

ing for something to cling to, when a firm hand grasped hers, and the voice of Fabrizio said—

‘You tremble, Madonna; my pupil was not wont to be thus easily appalled.’

‘Padre Fabrizio,’ Eglanbie replied, but he interrupted her, saying quickly—

‘Padre no longer; forget, Madonna, that phase in my former history, the thralldom to which not my will but my poverty consented—another career is now open before me.’

‘Cavaliere Fabrizio, then,’ Eglanbie replied slowly, as if waking from a dream. ‘I now recognise in you one whose fame has reached Queen Margaret’s Court—one whom Louis, the dark Dauphin, and Philip of Burgundy consult rather than their ablest counsellors, one skilful to draw the horoscopes of princes and cast the nativities of their children! Is it not true? Speak, for I have suspected this before.’

‘It is true,’ replied the astrologer. ‘All that man doth most covet—influence, favour, gold—are showered upon me in the path I have shaped for myself; but, mark me, lady, there is a reverse to the picture—disgrace, torture, death, may be the lot of him whose predictions fail or please not; they may be the lot of him who

now stands before you, and that at no distant day. I shrink not from them ; I have staked existence on one throw, and am content to triumph or to perish.’

‘ And what do you in England ?’ asked Eglanbie, turning pale. ‘ Scarcely can this isle be a safe abode for him who, if report err not, hath predicted unparalleled miseries shortly to come upon us.’

‘ I am but one of many,’ replied Fabrizio, ‘ who read in the approaching conjunction of Mars, Jove, and Saturn a fearful augury of bloodshed and foul crime. Since such miseries be at hand, is it not well to know and provide against them ? But I speak to one who hath, doubtless, obeyed her father’s commands to the letter, and banished from her memory all such lore as this ; one who may, perchance, betray and undo me, by proclaiming what I was and what I am.’

‘ Fabrizio,’ replied the maiden, proudly, ‘ thou knowest full well that thy secret is safe with me ; that I would not betray thee, neither undo thee, for all the gold thou and thy brother alchemists could make. As for the lore thou didst once teach, it is not forgotten, as thou dost falsely surmise. Almost I would it were, for do I

not know and read in the heavens now that yonder cresset, which glares so fiercely on thee and me, is in the eighth house—the house of death!’

‘Thou hast remembered aright, maiden,’ answered the astrologer; ‘the augury is evil, but what of that? If life be short, shall we not do the more to make it famous? Say, ere we part—for part we must, and that right soon—doth thy royal mistress affect these mysteries?’

‘Scarcely,’ replied Eglanbie; ‘she is one who shapeth her own ends boldly, and would liefer control the planets than read them; yet, in moments of great fear and tribulation, I have seen her incline to the predictions of soothsayers.’

‘Sway her to do so,’ said the wily Italian; ‘it may be for her good. And now farewell, Madonna; and shouldst thou need my help, there is one named Craven at the ‘Tabard,’ in Southwark, who shall at all times know where to find me.’

He left her, and returned to the deep calculations for which he had chosen that bright and cloudless night. But the housetop was no longer solitary; many gazers were crowding up to it, and Cecily appeared at the little door, and prayed Eglanbie to return to her. Sleep

was out of the question ; so our trio heard with satisfaction the voices of Sir Thomas Dutton and his brother calling them forth to view the prodigy from a neighbouring eminence. Towards morning it gradually faded away, and with it some of the feelings of terror and oppression it had created. May-day broke calm and lovely, and before the sun had mounted high in heaven voices of mirth were heard on all sides. The maypole, drawn by oxen with garlands tied to the top of their horns, was brought to the open place where it was to be erected. Handkerchiefs and ribbons streamed from it, and a crowd of men, women, and children followed it ; the boys bearing white willow wands wreathed round with cowslips, the girls carrying chaplets of real or artificial flowers, to be hung up in the churches when the day's festivity was over. Minstrels paraded the streets with song and tabor, and children added to the noise, though not to the harmony, by blowing with all their might through cows' horns and hollow canes. Such were the diversions of those days, when kings and nobles used to go a-maying, and mingle freely on holidays with the meanest of their subjects.

Our travellers were growing anxious to reach their journey's end, but tarried to hear early mass in the abbey church. Some little they were detained also by the hospitable abbot,* who pressed Sir Thomas and his brother to partake of refreshment, and afterwards showed them the many splendid decorations he had added both to the church and convent library. In the latter there was not much that his guests could appreciate; but their curiosity was roused by seeing the dark Italian, whom they had met at the 'Chequer,' seated in an obscure nook, poring intently over some ancient parchments. They inquired into his history, and the Abbot made answer—

'Whence he now cometh I wot not. He is of a noble race in Florence, and hath, by his learning and deep skill in science, won the favour of Duke Philip of Burgundy and of the French Dauphin. The former hath given him letters to the Cardinal Primate, who hath recommended him to me for certain researches he is desirous to make in this our library. He is an erudite and witty scholar, and talketh

* John of Wheathamstede, author of the *Chronicle of St. Albans*.

readily of books ; but on all other matters is fenced in impenetrable reserve. I gather from him that this is his first visit to England.'

About midday the party quitted St. Albans ; they rode by a long, ancient wall, built of stone mixed with flints and great numbers of Roman tiles. Letitia looked curiously through a doorway in this wall, and caught a glimpse of an old conventual building screened by fine trees. ' This,' said Sir Thomas, ' is the nunnery of Sopewell, whereof Dame Juliana, sister of my friend Lord Berners, is prioress. She is a woman renowned for beauty and sprightly wit as much as for virtuousness of life. Moreover, her skill in hunting and hawking exceedeth that of most men.'

' I have heard of her,' said Eglanbie, smiling ; ' she resembleth not the prioress of whom Master Chaucer writ, as being ' full simple and coy.'''

' Marry that doth she not,' replied Sir Thomas, laughing, ' neither would she, like that same prioress, ' wepe if that she saw a mouse caught in a trappe,' for from girlhood she hath hunted the wild boar, the roe, and every beast either of sweet flight or unsavoury flight known in this island. It is much if we do not

meet with her to-day, for on each festival, I am told, she taketh the pastime of the chase.'

The prophecy was verified instantly, for as they entered a little thicket the tread of horses' feet and the musical tinkle of falcons' bells were heard approaching. Dame Juliana on her palfrey was before them—a woman of majestic presence and open, beaming face. She wore the Benedictine habit—a tunic of black undyed wool, a white wimple and scapular, and over her shoulders a long black robe. She wore no cowl, reserving that for the chapel and other solemn occasions. Round her neck was a massive gold chain, with a plain gold cross suspended to it.

But Letitia's attention was riveted by the falcon perched on Dame Juliana's wrist, a bird of exquisite beauty, and perfect training; she (for the female bird was reckoned more courageous and active than the male, and consequently preferred) was hoodwinked and held by jesses, or leather-straps fastened round her yellow legs. A tiny silver bell made in Milan was attached to each foot, and gave forth a shrill but pleasant sound. The body of the falcon was ash-coloured, spotted with brown, and her tail was crossed by four or five black-

ish bars. She turned her head proudly on hearing the strangers approach, exhibiting not the slightest sign of shyness or fear.

Stately yet amicable greetings passed between Sir Thomas Dutton and the Prioress. Then followed an introduction to his young companions, and a few words touching the events of the time, the latest tidings from Lord Berners, who was at Greenwich with the King; and last, not least in importance, the portent of the night before. But Dame Juliana was soon recalled to the business in hand by her falconer's voice saying in her ear, 'Madam, there is a heron at siege by the pool. Shall we let fly?'

'Ay, and that speedily,' she answered. 'Sir Thomas, I pray you tarry to see the end of this gear. Bright-eye will fetch down the heron at the first flight, I warrant me. Here is a damoselle who, if I read her thoughts aright, will back me in this suit, and plead for a few moments' grace.'

Sir Thomas demurred an instant, then yielded to the eager wish expressed in Letitia's eyes. They rode through the thicket, and found themselves close to the edge of a pool of no great size or depth, but pleasantly

skirted with trees, and fringed with reeds and water-irises. At its further end stood the graceful heron, absorbed in watching for its prey, and quite unconscious of danger at hand. And now the party halted, and a falconer crept as near the heron as he could, going under the wind, with a haggard falcon on his wrist. This bird, technically called the driver, he let off, after unhooding her and loosing her jesses. She immediately made for the heron, which raised its slender head in alarm, and prepared for flight, working in the wind a second or two before it fairly took wing. Then the Prioress slipped off Bright-eye's hood, and softly whistled her off her wrist, beckoning Lettice to do the same. It was an anxious moment for Lettice, whose falcon, Deva, a young and valuable bird, had never yet been let off without her creance, the long thread by which hawks in training used to be reclaimed. Deva, however, did her part admirably; and it was beautiful to see her and Bright-eye, first wheeling in circles immediately overhead, then rising, rising steadily against the blue sky. They worked up above the heron, and then the chase began; Bright-eye and Deva pouncing occasionally, then descending to the wrist, then

rising and pouncing again; the heron, with its head sunk between its shoulders, and its legs outstretched, eluding their merciless talons. From time to time it uttered its harsh wild cry, half of defiance, half of distress.

The decisive moment came. Deva pounced on the poor heron, trussed him, and bore him fluttering and screaming to the ground. Dame Juliana for a moment could not hide her discomfiture at the defeat of her favourite, Bright-eye. The next, however, she turned to congratulate Lettice; but the eager girl had urged her palfrey forward, and was cantering over some rough ground to the scene of action. At her first call, Deva resigned her prey to the falconer, wheeled two or three times round her young mistress's head, and finally settled on the slender outstretched wrist. Lettice caressed and hooded her, and was returning in triumph to Sir Thomas's side. Short triumph, alas! was hers! An adder crawling among the loose stones and shrubs that covered that waste ground, fastened upon her palfrey's foot, and inflicted so severe and fiery a bite, that the terrified animal reared suddenly. Lettice was thrown, and the back of her head came with stunning force against the stump of a tree.

There she lay as one dead, and with the very hue of death on her face. She remained unconscious while Sir Thomas raised her from the ground and with womanly gentleness unfastened her cap, and stanchd the few drops of blood that trickled amongst her fair hair. When Cecily brought some water from the pool, and sprinkled it on the pale forehead, only a few shiverings and moanings told that life was there.

‘Lettice, sweetheart, look up,’ she cried, wringing her hands; ‘look up, my tenderling, open those blue eyes once more, and smile upon me! Oh! she is gone again. Will not these hot tears bring her to herself? But I waste time in idle sorrow. Help me, Sir Thomas. Say, whither shall we carry her?’

‘To our house of Sopewell,’ interposed the Prioress, in a kind, decided voice. ‘Sister Scholastica hath ridden forward to put all in readiness, and the hospital-sister will be here anon with a litter.’

‘Thanks, kind mother,’ was all Cecily could say, as, with Parnel’s help, she divided the long silky tresses, and sought for the wound that must have been inflicted. There were

small outward tokens of it, except one gash, from which blood continued to well slowly.

‘Let it flow,’ said the Prioress; ‘would it flowed faster, for then should the o’er-fraught brain find some relief.’

The litter soon appeared, and its unconscious freight was placed in it and conveyed to the nunnery. She was at once carried to the infirmary, and laid on a small bed with sheets and hangings of snowy whiteness. The room was very peaceful, furnished simply but invitingly, and looking out, through its long narrow windows, on a green and quiet landscape. It was calculated to hold eight or ten patients, but seldom received even half that number, as the convent itself was bound by statute to admit but thirteen nuns. At this moment one old and infirm sister was its only occupant. The Prioress, therefore, placed the apartment at the travellers’ disposal; and quiet being absolutely required for the patient, she authoritatively dismissed all but Cecily and Parnel. She then summoned the hospital-sister, whose knowledge of leechcraft was by no means contemptible, and after short consultation, bleeding in the arm, a favourite remedy in that age, was resorted to. Then,

by Dame Juliana's advice, or rather command, for she was one of those persons whose will is rarely disputed, the golden locks were all cut off. This office Cecily would depute to none, though it cost her some silent tears, especially when no recognition followed the loving service.

But towards nightfall the symptoms altered greatly; the dead stupor passed away, and the child began to move and utter inarticulate sounds. Then the names of Maurice and Cecily were audible, and by degrees her talk became wild, rambling, and incessant. Fever had come on, and with it delirium, and for several days they defied all remedies. Neither good Sister Bennett's decoction of feverfew, nor Parnel's outward application of moonwort, considered then so 'singular for wounds,' were of any avail. Perhaps the kerchiefs wrung out of coldest spring water which Cecily applied day and night, had most effect, for they produced from time to time a lull, and even half an hour or so of troubled sleep.

It was in one of these intervals that Cecily first found time to write to Sir Piers. Sister Bennett was taking her turn of watch by the sick girl; and Parnel, by Cecily's orders, had

gone to bed. Curfew-toll had ceased, and the ringing of a small bell had warned every inmate of the house to retire to her dormitory. There, as well as in the cloister and refectory, St. Benedict's rule of silence was strictly enforced; so the stillness was profound within. Not so without, for scores of nightingales were singing, far and near, and their piercing notes, vying with, and answering one another, rang through the woods.

Immediately under Cecily's windows was the little graveyard in which for more than three hundred years the Sisters of Sopewell had been buried. Lowly headstones marked their resting-places, and crosses of more elaborate workmanship distinguished those of such former prioresses as were not interred in the chapel. A nightingale poured forth its song from a hawthorn within this quiet enclosure; and, as Cecily leaned forth and listened, she thought no sweeter or more soothing requiem could be sung over the holy dead. But her thoughts soon reverted to the living, and first of all to Piers, who would be anxiously looking for tidings of their arrival in town. She reproached herself with having let three days elapse without advising him of her present position, and

resolved to send Hal Nixon (who, with Hamo, was still at the 'Chequer' in St. Albans) to Wigmore Castle the very next day. Not without some difficulty, and a feeling of shyness, did the young wife indite her first epistle to her husband. It ran as follows :—

‘To the Worshipful Knight of Holforde be this delivered in haste.

‘Right Worshipful Husband,—I humbly commend me to you, desiring most heartily to hear of your welfare and safe arrival at Wigmore; and also praying, night and day, that counsels of peace, and not of strife, may attend you there. Still I have little leisure, and less skill for writing all I desire you to know. I pray you interrogate Hal Nixon, who shall tell you of our present heaviness, by reason of our sister Letitia her grievous hurt. Liefer would I gladden your heart with recounting the goodness of the Lady Prioress of Sopewell, who in gentle wise doth make us gentle cheer, and doth entreat my Lettice as though she were a daughter.

‘I trust I am fulfilling your pleasure in sending Hal to you at Wigmore. It were not well that Hamo should tarry long at the

‘Chequer,’ where there is much dicing and great resort of jugglers and tymbesteres ; yet dare I not despatch him elsewhere without knowing your will in the matter. For monies we be well furnished, for we have depensed full little on the road, thanks to the courteous Knight of Dutton, which oft-times would not let us pay our reckonings, albeit we wrangled with him in the matter. He is right fatherly, and loves my Lettice well. He and his brother and Mistress Eglanbie Trowtbecke rode to Barnet on Monday last. The Lord Berners, brother to Dame Juliana, our prioress, was here yester morn ; and by him, who seemeth a courtly noble gentleman, I sent most lowly excuses to her Highness the Queen, on Lettice her behalf ; also messages to the Lady Kynderton. Let me hear of you soon, and God and His holy ones have you in their keeping evermore. Right worshipful husband and most best beloved, I beseech you do nothing rashly. My Lettice would have sent you greeting, but, alas ! the fever hath acrazed her brain ; she knoweth me not, but ever babbleth of the green Cheshire hills ; suing, in piteous wise, for one draught, one sparkling draught, from Woodcock’s Well. Farewell. I have so

washed this little bill with salt tears, that scarce shall ye read it. Yet one thing shall ye ever know, and, I trust, never misdoubt, that I am

‘ Your true loving wife,

‘ CECILIE HOLFORDE.

‘ Writ at midnight, the Friday after
the Invention of the Cross.’

The postscript of this epistle (for ladies’ letters lacked not postscripts in the fifteenth century) was thus worded :—

‘ Hal is befurnished with 4 gold angels, whereof he shall give account to you : he is an honest knave and a clear-headed. I doubt not ye have duly ordered that masses should be sung or said for our grandfather, whose soul the Heavens assoilzie ; would ye could be with me here, to hearken to the jubilation of melodious birds unknown in our Cheshire groves. Farewell.’

Promptly and sagaciously did Hal fulfil the behests of his young mistress ; and in ten days he returned to Sopewell, bearing a reply from Sir Piers. It was written from Cirencester, whither the Duke of York had sent him on a secret errand. Its contents brought mingled comfort and anxiety to Cecily ; comfort from the

perfect confidence and love they breathed, anxiety from the warlike tenor of their news.

‘ There be great power of fighting-men,’ he wrote, ‘ at the castle whence I come and whither I return to-morrow ; more than a thousand Welsh and Yorkshire men, all vassals of the Duke, and bearing his sable dragon with the claws of gold. The white-headed Earl of Salisbury is there also, with six hundred scarlet jackets at his back : his son, Richard Nevill, is daily looked for. This fiery lord, they say, sweareth he will be revenged on Somerset, and that speedily, for many indignities ; yet can he not belash our much-wronged Prince into equal fury, nor bring him to subscribe his hand to any disloyal proclamation against our lord the King.

‘ Touching our private matters, your tidings of our sister have wrought in me great heaviness of spirit. God grant she may amend shortly, and, my dearest life, tarry not at Sopenwell a day longer than her estate needeth, for methinketh it shall not be a safe harbour long. Would ye were both housed in the walls of Clerkenwell nunnery ; for this end I have given Hal such directions as shall expedite your journey thither. Of ours to the Manor, and of the sad pageant of Sir Ranulph’s bury-

ing, Hal is instructed to report unto you. Wax candles of the best shall burn in the chantry till All Saints'-day, or till Christmas, if ye list; Sir Armine will see to it. The Vicar hath fled, no man knoweth whither. There must be commission had from the Bishop to call him in, to be proclaimed thrice in church by a dean;* and if he appear not in six months, he shall be deprived, and the chancellor present to whom he listeth. Rob Wantwit shall soon lose that nickname, so cunning waxeth he in Sir Armine's school: nathless, he still prophesyeth strange things, the latest whereof is, that Duke Richard's head shall be exalted high and wear a crown by-and-by. And now, fare thee well, my life, and our Lord preserve thee in His keeping.

‘Thine own

‘PIERS HOLFORDE.

‘Cirencester, ninth day of May, 1455.’

When this letter arrived, Lettice's fever had subsided, leaving her utterly exhausted, but in her right mind and free from acute suffering. All idea of removal for the next fortnight was out of the question; and so frank and gracious

* Rural dean.—See *Paston Papers*, Letter 234.

was Dame Juliana's hospitality, and so strong the regard between her and 'the child Lettice' already, that Cecily could not bear to think of parting them, and resigned herself gladly to the necessity of staying on. The quiet life suited her own harassed mind perfectly, and when Lettice's danger ceased, the prioress insisted on her occasionally joining the nuns in cloister and refectory. She would wander up and down the priory domain, carpeted with sweet wild violets and golden anemone, or sit in the garden and listen to the harmless gossip of the good nuns. Sister Scholastica, a leading spirit amongst them, loved to tell 'how, three centuries ago, two holy women made themselves a poor dwelling of boughs, wattles, and stakes near the brook which runneth through the grove called Einwood. There they did lead a most austere life, feeding scantily on bread and water. Their pious demeanour being made known to Abbot Geoffry, of St. Albans, he was moved from on high to build a cell on that spot, with proper little mansions for holy women. The fame thereof advancing, both in spirituals and temporals, the said abbot endowed the cell and added a burial-ground unto it; and so it grew and flourished.'

‘But, alas!’ the sister added, with a sigh, ‘too long sunshine doth often scorch and harden the soil; and in course of time evil crept into this prosperous foundation; vain talking superseded the silence enjoined by our founder; guests were admitted to the parlour before the permitted hour of nones, and detained after the tolling of couvre-feu; and the cowl and veil of our order were disused, as savouring too much of distasteful strictness. These crying evils Abbot Michael reformed, enjoining sharp penance for every delict.’

‘Perchance,’ remarked Cecily, ‘this discipline hath helped to perpetuate the great name for sanctity this house hath obtained.’

‘Long may it keep that fair name,’ observed Sister Scholastica, not without asperity; but truly the talk we now hear of hawks and hounds sorteth not with cowl and scapular. ’Twas but last even, I am credibly assured, our Prioress was seen pacing the cloister with a falcon on her fist!’

‘Content you, good mother,’ answered Cecily, with a smile; ‘’twas but an act of charity on that gracious lady’s part, to humour a child’s sick fancy by bringing my Lettice the bird she pined after.’

‘Good, good!’ said the sister, somewhat appeased; ‘yet had Abbot Michael heard the clink of that falcon’s bells i’ the cloister, he would eftsoons have wrung her neck, I wis!’

Events were rife which drove the petty bickerings and heart-burnings of that small society into the background. Lord Berners, a stout and chivalrous Lancastrian, frequently came from Westminster to confer with his sister at Sopewell, and it was observed that Dame Juliana ever looked pre-occupied after these conferences. Her genial smile and cheerful voice became overclouded and sad, and though kind as ever, she grew more reserved towards Cecily.

It was not till the 19th of May, St. Dunstan’s-day, that Lady Holforde learnt the true state of matters from Sir Thomas Dutton, who came to Sopewell on his way north to inquire for tidings of Lettice. The Duke of York, with the Nevills, father and son, Lord Cobham, and others, were expected daily to march eastward; and it was thought that the Londoners, the majority of whom were stanch Yorkists, would readily join them. The King, on his part, showed no lack of spirit. With the aid of the Dukes of Somerset and Buckingham,

and many other nobles, he levied more than two thousand soldiers, and prepared for action.

‘On the 20th of May the King,’ says Holinshed, ‘meaning to meet with the Duke rather in the north parts than about London, where he had so many friends, departed from Westminster and laie the first night at Watford.’

Two days later the Duke of York, with a force of three thousand men, marched upon St. Albans; but ere he could enter the town the royal army had taken possession of it; the King’s standard was planted in St. Peter’s-street, and Lord Clifford, with a strong body of retainers, undertook to guard the gates, and prevent the possibility of a surprise.

All that night and the previous day had the Lancastrian troops passed along the road which skirted the Sopewell domain. There were pikemen, billmen, bowmen, armed retainers, known by the various cognizances of the Lords Stafford, Pembroke, Wiltshire, Sudeley, Berners, Roos, and many more, all hurrying towards their rallying-point, round the King’s banner. It could no longer be hid from Lettice, who was now convalescent, that a battle was at hand, and contending fears and hopes agitated

her breast, and sent a hectic flush to her cheek as she thought of Maurice and looked at Cecily. True, Maurice was not there; he and his gallant master were far away, and the post of duty was for once the post of safety too; but how long would it be so?

And Cecily? lonely in spirit and restless in body, she paced the greensward all that day, stopping from time to time to listen at the postern-gate. Towards ten o'clock, Hamo came breathlessly.

‘ My master sendeth you this ring, madam,’ he said, ‘ and biddeth me rehearse to you how matters stand. At early dawn King Henry sent no less a messenger than the Duke of Buckingham to ask what meant this warlike array of the Duke of York. Then answered Duke Richard and his liegemen, and my master stood amongst them, ‘ We be his Majesty’s true subjects, and intend no harm at all to him; let but that wicked and naughty man the Duke of Somerset be delivered unto us, who hath lost Normandy and Guienne, and brought this realm to such miserable estate, that whereas it was the flower of nations, it is now most desolate. Let but that bad man be delivered to us, I say, and we be ready without

breach of peace to return to our own countrie.' But the King, or those about him, returned answer 'that he would make no conditions with traitors, and by the faith he owed to St. Edward and to the crown of England, all such should die, every mother's sonne of them, and eke be hanged, drawn, and quartered, for example to others.' And so, madam, the parley ended; and so my master bids you pray for the right and for him.'

The eager stripling returned through a thousand perils to his master's side; and Cecily, shuddering as she heard the first trumpet-call to arms, resumed her solitary walk. The battle-cries were distinctly audible at that distance; shouts of 'A Warwick! a Warwick!' rent the air as that nobleman's troops broke down the garden-wall between the 'Key' and 'Chequer;' and fiercely setting on the King's vanguard, in a short time discomfited the same. Right sharp and cruel was the fight, Somerset and the other lords returning again and again to the rescue of their worsted comrades, and the Duke of York, on his side, ever sending fresh relays to help the weary and replace the slain.

As the day advanced, every inmate of Sope-

well repaired to the chapel, and even Lettice found strength to leave her sick room and join the trembling worshippers; but soon a cry of terror rose amongst them, as Parnel entered with the intelligence that Somerset was slain. He, who had long before been warned to shun all castles, had died under the sign of the 'Castel.' By his side lay gallant Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, Humphry Lord Stafford, son of the Duke of Buckingham; Lord Clifford, so frighthfully avenged in after years by his ruthless son; Sir Bertram An-thwisell, and many, many more, weltering in their blood; and at the sight of this ghastly array of corpses, Buckingham, Lord Wiltshire, and most of their following—men 'better skilled to play the courtier than the warrior'—fled; through hedges and woods, under shrubs and copses, they sought a hiding-place till the fury of the battle was spent. Only King Henry would not flee; and though wounded in the neck by an arrow, he stood silent and motionless under his drooping banner, till not a single man remained at his side. Then, says the chronicler, 'he withdrew himself into a poore man's house, to shun the shot of arrowes that flue about him as thicke as snowe.'

Sir Piers had done his part that day boldly, and with no wavering arm had sought the overthrow of Somerset, whom in his heart he believed an enemy to the realm and traitor to the King. But when victory had declared itself for the White Rose, and the Lancastrians had taken to flight, his aim became rather to save life than to destroy it. He looked on, not unmoved, while Richard of York and the Nevills twain bent their knee before King Henry, beseeching him to grant them grace and forgiveness of that they had done, and earnestly protesting themselves his true liege men. He heard the King's brief agonized reply, 'O cease the slaughter; let my subjects live!' and hastened forth, armed with full powers by the Duke of York to see this royal command obeyed. It was high time, for terrible excesses were beginning to be committed by the victorious soldiery. They roamed the narrow streets, red with Lancastrian blood, and choked up at many points with dead bodies—these they stripped for the sake of booty—and then, penetrating into the houses, terrified and plundered the harmless burghers and their families. The inmates of the abbey began to tremble for its safety; but happily it stood at

some distance from the scene of conflict, and order was in a measure restored before the spoilers could reach it.

Towards evening large bodies of flushed and excited soldiery spread up in the direction of Sopewell, and the good nuns quaked as they heard their drunken shouts, and saw the gleam of their blood-stained pikes. Only the Prioress continued firm, though her mind was torn with deeper anguish than she chose to reveal; for since noon no tidings had reached her of the gallant Lord Berners. Twilight fell upon the blood-stained town, the sounds of riot and licence grew louder, and as Dame Juliana looked at her helpless sisters, and at the jewelled shrine and costly offerings in her guardianship, her hitherto fearless spirit began to die within her. But God had not forgotten her good deed and loving charity towards the distressed travellers; and now she found, that in harbouring and cherishing Lettice and Cecily she had entertained angels unawares.

At the very height of the tumult, horses' feet came trampling up to the postern-gate; a sudden lull and quietness ensued, and, looking out, Dame Juliana saw a double hedge of armed men posted round her domain. A steel-clad

knight dismounted and reverently craved one moment's speech with the Lady Prioress and her guests in the parlour. So Cecily saw her husband again, unscathed and victorious, and through the iron grating that divided them his mailed hand sought and for an instant grasped her trembling fingers; and as Dame Juliana heard of her brother's safety, and learnt that he had met with such usage at the hands of the victorious Prince as one Christian knight should show to another, her spirit revived, and comfort and thanksgiving mingled with the sadness of defeat. She rejoiced also to know that the King's hurt had proved slight, and that he was 'greatly consoled' with the reverence and tenderness he met with from his cousin of York; but at the tidings that Cecily and Lettice must leave Sopewell the next morning, and journey in the train of the King and Duke of York to London, she turned her face away and wept.

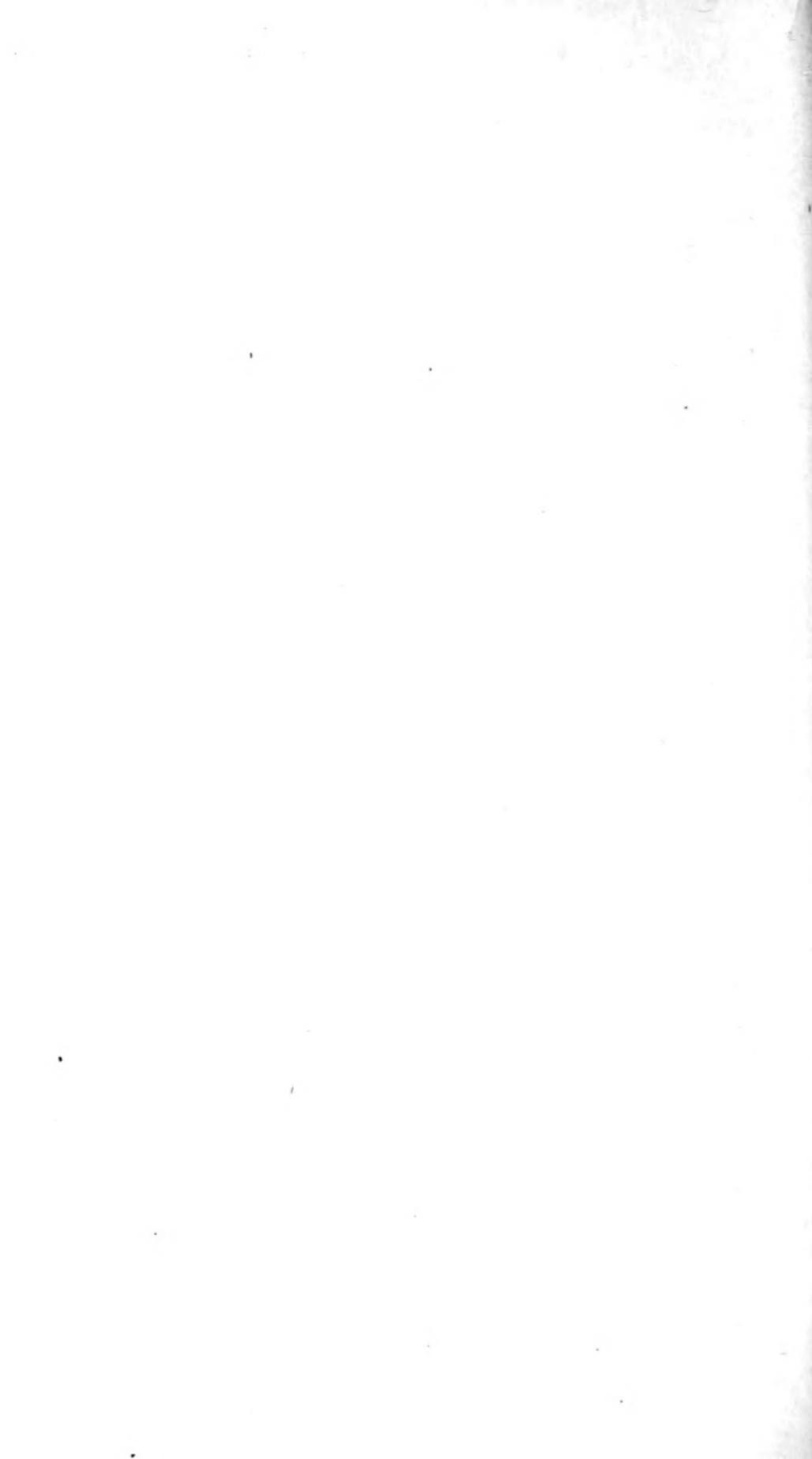
Sir Piers departed; and after paying his homage to King Henry in St. Albans Abbey, spent the night in seeing to the burial of the dead. 'The bodies of the noblemen were buried in the Lady Chapel,' said Holinshed, 'and the mean people in other places. This

was the end of the first battle of St. Albans, fought on the Thursdaie next before Penthecost; and upon the day next after, the King and the Duke of York, the Earles of Salisburie and Warwicke, came all to London, and were lodged in the Bishop's Palace of London, and there they kept their Whitsuntide with great joye and solemnitie.'

END OF PART I.



PART II.



CHAPTER I.

OF THE COURT AND THE KINGMAKER.

O goodly golden chayne wherewith yfere
The vertues linkèd are in lovely wyze;
And noble minds of yore allyed were
In brave pursuit of chevalrous emprize,
That none did others' safèty despise.

SPENSER.

WHICH is most beautiful, the bright green of fragrant spring, or the soft, mingled colouring of an autumn landscape? Which rivets eye and heart most, glowing youth in her prime of beauty, or serene old age, full of benignity, and of the hope that is not of earth?

The springtide both of nature and of human life will probably attract more votaries than its decline; yet look with me into yonder long low chamber in the Palace of Westminster, where a lady of seventy-five sits reading, and you will agree that her face and form are such as to withdraw the gaze even from the bright maiden seated at her feet.

Yet has she drunk more deeply than most of the cup of sorrow; and since the day—fifty-five

years ago—when her husband was murdered in cold blood after the battle of Shrewsbury, she has never known exemption from those carking cares which eat into the heart as deeply as grief. The Baroness of Kynderton, for it was she, wore a robe of black brocade, which fell in ample folds round her tall, slight figure ; a cap, or rather wimple, of snowlawn, closely crimped, covered her small head, and harmonized with the delicate faded complexion. Narrow bands of the softest grey hair defined the outline of a forehead, not high, but broad and unwrinkled. Her eyes were almond-shaped, and of the deepest violet, softened, not dimmed, by the lapse of time and by the many tears which her own griefs, and the griefs of others, had caused them to shed. A veil of Cyprus lawn, worn over the wimple, denoted her a widow.

Closing her book—Chaucer's *Flower and Leaf*—she looked towards Letitia, who was busily carving round a little ivory cup a border of Queen Margaret's loved device, the daisy flower. The girl's head was bent down, and she spoke not at all, or but a few words under her breath ; but the Baroness was pleased to mark a brighter smile dimpling her cheeks than had dwelt upon them for months past. For

three years and a half of Court life had made our Lettice a sadder if not a wiser person. Hers had been a chequered career. At one time, pinings after Maurice and her Cheshire home had possessed her mind—for Maurice's visits to the Court and to her had necessarily been few and far between; at another, the notice and admiration excited by her grace and originality had been sufficiently delightful to stifle all other longings. Suitors for her hand had presented themselves from time to time, instigated or encouraged by the Queen; but Lettice's spirit revolted from marriage without affection,—albeit the common practice of that day—and not even the Queen's arbitrary mode of match-making could bend her will to it. And Margaret, marking the deep attachment that existed between her and her royal nursling, forbore to press any suit that would remove her from the Prince's service. So Lettice passed on, fancy free, or supposed to be so, by the society she moved in. Perhaps the piercing eye of Lady Kynderton saw deeper, not without kindly regret, that she had been the innocent cause of some intimacy between Lettice and her own high-spirited young kinsman Hugh, Baron of Kynderton. She might be mistaken; but it appeared to her at

one time that his knightly qualities had excited something of unusual interest in the breast of Lettice. If such a feeling existed, it was promptly and proudly stifled on the return of Eglanbie Trowtbecke to Westminster, after one of her frequent visits to some noble friends at Bruges. Weary of the Court, where her haughty temper had made many enemies, yet loathing a home where her secret studies were strictly forbidden, Eglanbie saw no escape from either but in marriage. Her father was equally anxious to provide an establishment for one whom he could neither fathom nor control ; so, after the fashion of those times, he opened a negotiation with Sir Hugh. It was gladly responded to ; not from the mercenary motives which, to a remarkable degree, swayed the gallants of that day, but from a sudden blinding admiration, inspired by Eglanbie's beauty. Piqued by his dawning preference for Lettice, she had spared no pains to attract him ; and, while doing so, she had found herself attracted, nay, riveted. She who had gained an ascendancy over all that came in contact with her, now shrank with an unwonted sense of inferiority. Sir Hugh's truth, simplicity, scorn of evil, over-awed yet charmed her ; and she gave herself up, with all the pas-

sionateness of her nature, to this new feeling. So the alliance had been concluded upon, to the deep though secret regret of the aged Baroness ; and the fact was announced to, and received by, Lettice without a word of comment. It was no small consolation to Lady Kynderton that her youngest and best-beloved grandson, Richard Venables, was daily expected in England, after two years' campaigning in Spain against the Moors. He had been trained under her own eye from early childhood, in the love of all that is good and great, and to him she looked to realize, in every respect, her fondest hopes, and to close her eyes in peace.

I have said that the few words uttered by Lettice were in a whisper. A glance at the interior of the chamber will show the reason of this : its furniture had once been rich, but was now much the worse for wear ; for the king's exchequer, impoverished by years of prodigality, had nothing to spare for household expenses. Old-fashioned chairs and inlaid cabinets were set round the walls. Two richly-carved beds helped to darken the room, and beside them was a much smaller bedstead, covered with a quilt of azure silk, and distinguished by King Henry's device of two feathers in saltire, the one gold, the

other silver, carved at its head. Here in deep slumber lay the royal child, now five years old; one little hand propped his fair curly head, while the dimpled left arm was thrown round Blanch, a white, silky-haired dog of the smallest dimensions, the companion of his play, as now of his slumbers. The Prince's cheek was unusually flushed, and a tear lay upon it. This the Baroness, who had risen to look at him, softly wiped away; then she said to Lettice:—

‘Came you to speech of our royal mistress even now?’

‘I did, lady,’ was the reply. ‘Her Majesty holds her Court in the State Chamber to-day, and it is her pleasure that the Prince of Wales should attend her. I gather that the Earl of Warwick will be there.’

A start from Lady Kynderton encouraged Lettice to proceed. ‘The Queen is sore bestead, and did at first vehemently protest she would not see him. She stamped her foot, and cried, ‘York I could forgive, Salisbury I could forgive; but Warwick never.’’

‘And no marvel,’ rejoined the Baroness: ‘those have but attacked her crown, he hath stabbed her good name. He hath preferred such foul charges against her wifely truth as woman

could scarce forgive; and, alas! such is his credit with the people, that these rumours set forth by him do gain wide credence.'

'I know it,' said Lettice, with mournful hesitation; 'but you, lady—you, surely, do not, cannot, believe them?'

'Did I believe them,' answered Lady Kynderton, 'I would not tarry till another sunset under this palace roof. No, no; our Queen is lion-like in temper, fierce towards her foes, and perchance too quickly swayed by those she trusts, but she is true at heart.'

'And that same lion-like port she hath transmitted to this baby-prince,' said Letitia. 'Right beautiful it is to see his eyes flash fire, his broad chest heaving, his tiny hand clenched in anger; then speak but one soft word and the wrath is gone; and as ice on the hill-top, so doth the gleam in his hazel eye melt into a gush of tears and smiles.'

'Ah, Lettice,' said the Baroness, 'I could chide thee sometimes for fostering, when thou shouldst repress, these starts of pride. Thou deemest them princely and becoming, fond girl, and dost forget that he who is born to rule must first perfectly obey. Oh! beware how thou dost touch the strings of this sweet human

instrument, drawing therefrom discord instead of music. But see, he wakes.'

The sleeper now began to stir, and raising his head, looked around him wistfully; but, seeing Lady Kynderton at his side, he grew bright, and clasped his arms round her neck caressingly. 'Grandam, was it a dream? or was I of a truth froward even now?'

'It was no dream, your Highness,' replied the Baroness, gravely; 'you were disobedient, and therefore chidden.'

'I do remember me,' said the child; 'I did entreat poor Blanch full roughly in my anger. Good grandam, I will not do it again, i' faith I will not.'

'I' faith, say you, my Prince?' Lady Kynderton answered, with a smile. 'Well, I may trust you, for a king's son will not lightly break his faith. Now rise and let us make ready for the presence-chamber.'

'And while Lettice combs these locks, which my unquiet sleep hath so tangled, rehearse to me, dear grandam, the story of the dragon that hangs from thy girdle.'

The lady's keys, scissors, and lancet case, with other articles, were attached by chains to a silver lozenge, on which was engraved the Venables

crest; and this, again, was fastened by a hook into her girdle. Her nursling fixed his clear eyes on the dragon, while she cheerfully made answer—

‘Of a truth, my Prince, ye must know the legend by heart, yet here it is. ‘Four hundred years agone, Sir Gilbert Venables, cosyn-german to King William the Conqueror, came with him to England, and for his prowess was by him rewarded with the Lordship of Kyn-derton in your own fair Earldom of Chester; now, after that time, it chanced that a terrible dragon did make his abode in a great swamp in Moston Manor; this dragon, coming forth, devoured all that came that way, the which Thomas Venables, descendant of the said Gilbert, hearing of, did in his own person valiantly set on him. First he shotte him through with an arrowe, and afterwards with other weapons manfully slew him; at which iinstant of time the said dragon was devouringe of a childe.’ For this worthy and valiant act was given to him the said Lordship of Moston, and he and his heirs did assume for their crest this dragon which you now see; ’tis silver scaled, and pierced with an arrow, gold-headed and feathered silver, in its jaws a child, proper, haired, gold.’

‘ Be there dragons now ? ’ asked the Prince, with kindling eye. ‘ I would I were of age to wield a lance and rid my father’s subjects of them.’

‘ There be no dragons abroad in the land now-a-days,’ the lady answered ; ‘ but England hath yet worse foes, whom, by God’s help, your Highness shall one day subdue ; and, oh my Prince, within your nursery doors lurketh ever the dragon of pride and self-will—beware, beware of him, struggle with him even now manfully, and, by Christ’s dear grace, you shall come off victorious.’

The Prince was silent awhile, occupied with those high thoughts and aspirations which stir the childish heart more often and solemnly than its most watchful guardians know.

‘ I will pray my mother to-morrow take me to matins,’ he said at last, ‘ and I will be still when I am there.’

In another moment he was gambolling about the chamber with Blanch, somewhat to the discomposure of the locks Lettice had been elaborately disentangling ; however, the lady smiled on these frolics, thinking it sound policy to let the flow of spirits exhaust itself before the little Prince was summoned to represent in the

audience-chamber. Two hours later he was standing at his mother's side, receiving with exemplary gravity the homage of a throng of courtiers. They assembled in one of the state rooms (now destroyed) of Westminster Palace.* The royal seat, a broad, low divan, was placed in a rich oriel, the blue vaulted ceiling of which was powdered with gold stars; it was lighted from behind by several lancet-shaped windows, through which the rays of the winter sun (for it was the November of 1458) struggled feebly, dimmed by the river mists. An arras of gold and colours, representing the royal arms in numerous chequers, was stretched from pillar to pillar, forming the background to the seat where Margaret kept her state.

King Henry was away on one of his frequent pilgrimages to St. Albans Abbey, so she sat alone in her majestic beauty. On her head was a circlet of gold and gems, from which the yellow hair escaped and flowed over her mantle of royal purple. The pale gold of those tresses contrasted with the darker hue of the straight pencilled brows, and of the lashes which veiled

* This description is borrowed, in many particulars, from Miss Strickland's account of the manuscript presented by Earl Talbot to Queen Margaret of Anjou.

her piercing eyes. Her ladies, richly attired, stood behind; the matrons wearing high, horned head-dresses; the maidens, nets, or small heart-shaped caps, rich with jewels.

Egланbie Trowtbecke, now the betrothed bride of Sir Hugh of Kynderton, had adopted the latter costume, and stood near her royal mistress, cold, grave, and abstracted, but faultless in shape and feature. So thought many who gazed upon her, and so thought Sir Hugh as he watched her from a distance, inwardly chafing at the etiquette which forbade him, though knight-banneret and fourteenth baron of his name,* to draw nearer to the dais. A multitude of nobles, habited in full tunics trimmed with rich furs, and not a few ecclesiastics in court costume, now flocked to the upper end of the chamber to pay their devoirs to the Queen. Some, as the Dukes of Exeter and Somerset, and the Bishop-elect of Lichfield, John Halse, she greeted with the utmost cordiality. They were stanch and avowed partisans of her cause. Towards others, suspected of leanings to the House of York, her

* See ORMEROD'S *History of Cheshire*: Barony of Kynderton.

demeanour was cold and repelling, with one exception only, that of the Primate and ex-Chancellor, Cardinal Bouchier. He was a man of high birth, connected, in fact, with both the Houses of York and Lancaster, and, moreover, of such wary policy and smooth address, that the most fiery partisan on either side could not pick a quarrel with him. The Queen called him to her, and said—

‘What matter of grave import hath detained our most reverend kinsman from the council-board to-day? We needed your help much, to repress the truculent boldness of the Earl of Warwick.’

‘A weighty and mournful business, so please your Majesty,’ replied the Cardinal; ‘one the like of which hath not been known in this realm afore. Heresy hath reared her head and shown her poisonous fangs in high places, but I trust our morning’s work hath scotched that snake.’

‘You speak of the matter of Bishop Reginald Pecock?’ asked the Queen. ‘More pressing concerns have so besieged me of late, that I scarce know whereof he stands accused; yet could I not but marvel one so meek and withal so scholarly should cause so great a stir.’

‘Methinks it might be said of Dr. Pecoock,’ replied the Primate, ‘much learning hath made him mad. Your grace’s hair would rise on your head to hear but a tithe of the profanities wherewith he hath infected Oxford, nay, the whole realm!’

‘I have heard he denounced annates, Peter’s pence, and such-like, as fond inventions,’ said the Queen, not without maliciousness.

‘Ay, your grace; and he would do the sacred Scriptures into English, for the reading of the vulgar, and, further, he impugne the infallibility of the Church—impugne, said I? rather *did* impugn, for this morning, with bitter tears, he read his recantation in my court at Lambeth.’

Letitia Done, who lost not a word of this discourse, turned away to drop a tear for the unhappy prelate. The Queen, though made of far sterner stuff, sighed, ‘Poor man, and what further punishment shall betide him?’

‘Nothing less than a life-long captivity can wipe out his offence,’ answered the Cardinal; ‘but first, on some day not yet named, he must recant, in the hearing of all people, at Paul’s Cross, and see his wicked and per-

nicious books deputed to the fire, for the example and terror of all others.'

Queen Margaret's attention had wandered while the Primate spoke; and now she mechanically rose, while a dark gleam shot from her eye, and a deeper flush burnt on her delicate cheek. The Earl of Warwick had entered the presence-chamber.

The Kingmaker was distinguished at the first glance by his great height, towering from the shoulders upwards above the other nobles. His breadth of chest and strength of limb and muscle were equally remarkable; and to these nature had added a most commanding expression—a lofty forehead, coal-black eyes and hair, and a demeanour perfectly unaffected, yet full of dignity. These qualities, and many solid virtues (for Warwick, in a profligate age, was the best of husbands and fathers), made him the people's idol. 'They judged,' says a homely chronicler,* 'the sunne was clerely taken from the worlde when hee was absent; his only name sounded in every song of the common people, and no man had they in such honour, nor to the clouds so high extolled.'

* HALL'S *Chronicle*.

Such was this magnanimous, though turbulent baron; such the man whom Margaret hated with deep personal hatred, and who, in return, regarded her with aversion and disesteem. After the battle of St. Albans, his kinsman, Richard of York, had given him the captainship of Calais, vacant by Somerset's bloody death, and when, some months later, Queen Margaret dexterously wrested the power from York, such was Warwick's favour with the people, that she durst not dispossess him of his office. But she heaped insult and contumely upon him, and in 1457 either laid or connived at a treacherous plot against his liberty and life. He discovered it, and fled to Calais. In the next year a semblance of reconciliation between the contending factions had been brought about by Cardinal Bouchier, and a solemn procession to St. Paul's had notified this accord to the people. Strange sight it must have been! The Queen walking lovingly hand-in-hand with York, young Somerset with white-haired Salisbury, Exeter with Warwick! They were preceded by King Henry, the only true peace-lover amongst them, habited in his vestments royal, and wearing his crown upon his head. But the wall thus

flimsily built up, and daubed with untempered mortar, was soon to fall on their heads.

There was an involuntary hush while the Earl paid his cold stern duty to Queen Margaret. So defiant was the tone of her reply, that her little son looked up, his eyes full of innocent surprise. They met those of the Earl, whose eagle glance softened at once. The Prince stood erect by his mother's side, with a look of quick observing intelligence on his face, which did not in the least mar its sweet roundness and joyousness. He wore a crimson tunic with a deep border of ermine; a velvet cap with the well-known ostrich feather sat lightly on his auburn curls. On his left arm lay Blanch, curled up, and only manifesting consciousness by an occasional attempt to lick her master's hand.

And now, attracted by Lord Warwick's kindly gaze, the Prince instinctively extended his right hand, and before Margaret was aware, the Kingmaker had imprinted a kiss upon it. She drew her boy away, saying, bitterly—

‘Poor child! friend and foe are alike to thee! thou knowest not whose lips have touched thee.’

The Prince looked up perplexed.

‘Mother—your pardon—I know well who this lord is; ’tis your High Admiral, the same who, last summer, looked out from Calais town and espied the great Spanish navy; then sailed he forth, and fought a dreadful and sore battle, and slew a thousand of his enemies, and took the great ships. Didst thou not tell me so, Lettice?’

The Queen interposed.

‘In sooth, Mistress Letitia, you have learnt him his lesson well,’ she said, with repressed passion; ‘yet were it good the Prince should know the other side of this story; wise men there be in England not a few to whom this doughty deed beareth the ugly aspect of piracy.’

Letitia’s spirit was roused, and, though trembling, she might have made an overbold reply; but the Lady Kynderton advanced. Gently laying her hand on the girl’s lips, she said:—

‘Good, your grace, the fault, if fault there be, is mine; I have ever charged Mistress Lettice to enamour his Highness of all valourous and knightly achievements, and she hath but sought, in her young simpleness, to carry out this intent.’

‘Enough, enough, and too much of this matter,’ exclaimed Margaret, impatiently.

‘ Let the Prince retire, good Kynderton, and see that Agnes Courcy begin her turn of service to-night.’

There was no gainsaying the fiery Queen in her ‘ lionlike moods,’ as Lettice was wont to call these outbursts of wrath ; so Lady Kynderton signed the maiden instantly to withdraw. She did so, vanishing through a small concealed door at that end of the chamber. The Baroness was following with Prince Edward when she felt her sleeve plucked by Eglanbie Trowtbecke.

‘ Mistress Lettice had best quit the palace for a space,’ she whispered, hurriedly ; ‘ send her to my father’s at Whitehall.’

‘ A kindly thought,’ said the lady ; ‘ but it needeth not ; even had no untowardness occurred, it was ordered she should lie at my house in the Strand to-night, to see her sister Holforde ; a wherry waits for her now at Westminster-gate.’

‘ I will speak to Sir Hugh to see her safe thither,’ said Eglanbie, whose conscience, now she saw Lettice in disgrace, smote her sorely, for much secret and overt unkindness. Jealousy had been at the bottom of all, a twofold jealousy, excited not only, as we have said, by Sir Hugh’s cousinly intimacy with Lettice, but also by

the peculiar favour often shown her by her royal mistress.

For such clouds as had come between them now were of rare occurrence, and when they did arise, rather enhanced Lettice's enjoyment of the sunshine which, she trusted, would follow. Her own temper was far from equable, and her will strong; no wonder, then, that she found more charm in a fitful affection than in calm, unvarying regard, that she saw more beauty in the torrent than in the quiet rippling stream. It is not often that in early youth we learn the full value of steady, undemonstrative affection.

It could not be disguised that the Queen's outbursts of temper had of late become frequent and terrible, and while Lettice, in the solitude of her chamber, prepared for departure, her spirit sank at the remembrance of that withering glance and bitter sarcasm. The sorrow of her nursling at parting from her thus abruptly, though soothing, was trying too, and she hastened to cut short the adieux and be gone. Parnel had preceded her with the baggage, and the kind Baroness insisted on herself consigning her to the protection of Sir Hugh and his small band of servants. So

they threaded together the labyrinth of chambers opening one into another, and of long, low, damp corridors, till they reached the postern-door which faced the Thames.

On opening this, a scene of marvellous, though somewhat dreary, activity presented itself, so peculiar to the olden times of which we write, that we must pause to describe it. London presented then to the eye (as, indeed, it does now) strangely rapid transitions from grandeur to meanness. Rough hovels of all sorts and sizes were grouped at the back of the palace for the accommodation of the King's servants. The courts in which they stood were ill-paved and ill-lighted, so that great confusion often prevailed among the swarms of royal retainers who were incessantly coming and going. At this moment the presence of a score or two of Nevill men-at-arms, known by the 'ragged staff' on their scarlet jackets, and by a certain haughtiness of bearing peculiar to themselves, added to the hubbub not a little. They were bandying high words with what was then called the 'black guard,' that is, the scullions, cooks, turnspits, &c., of the royal kitchen. These made a formidable band, armed as they were with 'spits, fire-forks, and

cleavers.* The uproar increased every moment. Lady Kynderton grew uneasy, and was glad when she saw the stalwart figure of her grandson forcing his way through the crowd towards them. To him she commended Lettice, with a hasty but heartfelt blessing, and a promise to intercede with the Queen on her behalf.

And now Sir Hugh, drawing Letitia's arm within his, and bidding his men keep close, pushed manfully through the court-yard towards a door in the strong wall opposite. Not a word did he utter, except now and then a muttered imprecation against the 'greasy varlets' that stopped the way. One or two who beset Lettice's path he thrust back with a strength of arm that made them reel. One black-faced turnspit turned upon him savagely, and brandished a kitchen-knife in his face. He put it aside with his gauntleted hand, and reaching the door, drew its bolt, but found to his surprise that it was also locked. There was nothing to be done but to send back a stout man-at-arms for the key, and wait his return patiently. A sliding-panel in the door, now partially open, gave some glimpses of the

* HOLINSHED'S *Chronicle*.

river, reflecting faintly, through a wintry fog, the rays of the declining sun. It was crowded with wherries and barges. A busy hum came up from it, with snatches of song, the old boatman's chorus, 'Heave and how, rumbelow,' or the new roundel, 'Row the boat, Norman,' composed five years before in honour of a popular Lord Mayor. A narrow miry lane led from the palace-postern to the Water-gate. It was lined on both sides by booths, where all manner of wares were hung out for purchase, no bad speculation, as hundreds of persons passed backwards and forwards daily. There were Flemings crying out 'Buy, my masters, buy! Fine felt hats! Damask seven shillings the yard! Spectacles for to read withal, goodly dame! Lay down your silver, and here ye shall speed!' Further on, apprentices with blue caps and jaunty cloaks were offering 'apes, and japes, and tailed marmosets,' spice, pepper, and saffron for sale. Saucy-looking lads they were, with laughing eyes, white teeth, and a ready knack of puffing off their goods, that raised the mirth and opened the purse-strings of many a passer-by. Beyond these was a stall for manuscripts, where some few, mostly pale monks, were gazing wistfully at ancient parchments, or

missals 'bedropped with gold and azure.' But the favourite resort of all was the eating-booth, so vividly described by Lydgate in his comic song of 'London Lyckpenny.' Here he represents himself as having come to town in search of legal redress for some wrong, and wandering in a hungry and penniless condition to Westminster-gate :—

And cooks to me they took good intent,
And proffered me bread, with ale and wine,
Ribs of beef, both fat and full fine ;
A fair cloth they 'gan for to spread,
But wanting money, I might not be sped.

These various sights and sounds, and Sir Hugh's comments upon them, beguiled Lettice's attention for a few minutes ; but a sudden fierce shout from the palace-postern made them start, and looking back they saw the Earl of Warwick issuing from it. After a fiery altercation with the Queen, he was coming forth to take barge and return to his mansion in the Strand. Seeing a scuffle going on between his servants and the King's, he hastened to call his followers away from so unseemly a broil ; but ere he could raise his voice of thunder—a voice never yet disobeyed by one of the thousands who gloried in wearing the 'ragged staff' on

their breasts—a yell arose from the combatants. A tile, or some such ignoble missile, flung by a scullion, fell on the pate of one of the scarlet jackets. Quick as lightning his comrades flew to the rescue, felled the aggressor to the ground, and left him for dead. Oaths, threats, and blows quick as hail followed one another. Blood began to flow, and the Earl himself was in manifest jeopardy. His men, five-and-thirty at most, now clustered round him, and they stepped backwards in compact order towards the outward door, facing their ignoble pursuers. These being joined by a number of grooms, porters, and low fellows ready for mischief, amounted to more than three hundred. Some few who would have stopped the fray got no hearing, but were driven off with abuse and blows. One figure in friar's garb the Earl noted gliding stealthily through the throng, and exciting, not allaying, its fury. Something he said in the ear of one or two ruffians whose zeal in the cause seemed slackening, and they instantly sprang upon the Earl, shouting, 'Ay, ay, he saith well! Queen Margaret shall give its weight in gold for the Nevill's head.'

'Oh, false! oh, shame! that our royal lady should be so belied,' cried Lettice, shuddering.

‘ Sir Hugh, for her sake, and for the brave Earl’s sake, hasten to him ; he is sore pressed—he stumbleth—no, he stands upright again ! Help him, for Heaven’s love ! lest he die.’

‘ And you, Lettice, what can you do ?’

‘ Oh, care not for me,’ she said, pointing to a bulwark at the angle of the strong wall which then girt the palace. ‘ I will hide me there—begone, good Sir Hugh.’

No need to urge him. With one look of gratitude he bounded to the Earl’s side.

‘ Brave Nevill,’ he cried, ‘ I would give half my barony to meet thee in fair field ; but to see thee hacked in pieces by base cullions, nay, that passeth.’

Letitia meanwhile hastened into the friendly bulwark. It was nearly filled up with earth round the sides ; but a hollow in the centre afforded good shelter from the stones, iron bars, and other missiles that were flying perilously about. The din increased, and was responded to from outside, a mass of people from Westminster-gate and its purlieus having collected below the rampart. A voice, as of some one in authority, called out, ‘ What ho ! what meaneth this uproar ? Open, in the King’s name ! in the Lord Abbot’s name I bid you

open !' But the summons was disregarded or unheard. Looking through a loophole, Lettice espied a grave, resolute-looking functionary in black, backed by a score of well-armed officials. She knew him at once to be reeve or bailiff to the Abbot of Westminster, in whose hands the whole temporal, as well as spiritual, jurisdiction of the borough then lay. Behind him was a motley collection of burgesses, watermen, women and children detained against their will and crying out for fear, apprentices wielding cudgels or bludgeons. Like the Ephesian mob of old, 'the more part knew not why they had come together.' Lettice waved her kerchief.

'Help! my masters,' she cried; 'the Earl of Warwick is foully set upon. Help! break open the door—clear his way to the river.' Then clasping her hands, she added, faintly, 'Oh, see! the villains have thrust between him and Sir Hugh; he is left well nigh alone. Saint Stephen guard him now!'

Then the earl's voice was heard close to the bulwark; he shouted to the Lord of Kynderton, whom the violence of the mob had borne a considerable distance from him, 'Good Sir Hugh, imperil not thyself further for me; let the Nevill Bear shift for himself. It cannot be

that these kitchen kites and crows shall peck out his eyes !' The rash taunt was responded to by a yell, and Lord Warwick found himself pinned against the rampart, with scarce half a dozen of his retainers about him.

'Cut down the traitor ! it shall be reckoned good service,' was uttered by a voice among the crowd, not loud but clear. Lettice knew the voice, and she knew the dark-robed figure that gave it utterance. She had come face to face once before with this person, in the apartments of the Duchess of Bedford—a notorious student of magic and alchemy. That transient glimpse had all but convinced her that she beheld the former Vicar of Newbolde, Sir Roger, concerning whom nothing had been known since he absconded three years before. But she had paid him no very close heed, her attention being riveted by the more remarkable person in whose train he came. This was no other than Fabrizio, him whom we met before at the 'Chequer' in St. Albans, now master astrologer to Philip of Burgundy, and high in his trust for matters with which, it was thought, the stars had little concern. Whether Sir Roger were in this foreigner's service, or occupied some obscure post in the palace, Lettice could not be sure ; but she in-

clined to the latter belief, as he occasionally crossed her path, though furtively and at a distance. Now she recognised him beyond a doubt, and he ventured one glance towards her, and that of so unfriendly a nature as showed that past grievances had not been buried in Sir Ranulph's grave. However, this was no time for vain surmising; for the Earl, having freed his right arm for a moment, so as to draw his sword, now laid about with it so effectually as to beat back his assailants and clear his way into the bulwark.

He started when Lettice met his eye, cowering under the wall that afforded her protection, pale but resolved, with hands folded, parted lips, and blue eyes dilated by anxiety and listening. They beamed with comfort, however, when she saw that the invader of her hiding-place was no other than the Earl.

'Ha! a damsel,' he said, 'and, by my faith, the same that spoke gently of me in the court of yon perjured Queen! What dost thou here, fair child, in this den of thieves?'

While speaking, he stretched his arm to shield her from a descending missile. It rattled against his armour of proof and fell harmless; but more were on the wing, and the risk mani-

festly increased. The Earl looked through a loophole and saw the thoroughfare to the river lined with apprentices, eager to take his part ; so would the bargemen, he knew, for he was their idol. Once out of the palace-yard then, all would be well.

The excited rabble meantime, variously armed with pikes, knives, or cleavers, were pressing into the bulwark. Their wild looks, and the shouts and jeers raised at the sight of Lettice, terrified even her brave little heart, and she turned her burning face away, while the Earl, throwing himself before her, ground his teeth in scorn and indignation. Now a crash was heard ; the joint efforts of his friends within and without had burst the door, and Sir Hugh, with a score of hard-pressed Nevills, was fighting his way towards it. Fearful lest these should escape their hands, the rabble rout set upon them, leaving the Earl space to breathe and look about him.

‘Now is our time,’ he said to the handful of men around him. Yet he, the undaunted, still wavered, fearing further to endanger Lettice.

Under his shadow, however, she felt no fear. Seeing her courage up, he crossed himself,

grasped her firmly with his left hand, placed himself and his men between her and the assailants, and strode towards the doorway. His brave band and Sir Hugh seeing him re-appear, thrust their way through the mob, cheering loudly, and in an instant rallied round him. Friends and foes, pell-mell, now poured through the gate. Here the reeve and his party came manfully to the help of the Nevills, and drove back the greater part of their ignoble pursuers.

Some few, however, continued to harass Lord Warwick even to the water's edge; but he could laugh at their malice now, for the narrowness of the lane did not allow of their pressing upon him as before, and his gallant scarlet coats closed round him and Lettice, rending the thick air with shouts of 'A Nevill! a Nevill!' Moreover, a small party of gentlemen had landed from a wherry, and they and their servants came vigorously to the rescue, with flashing steel and cries of 'A Holforde!' 'A Venables!'

Lettice clapped her hands in delight as the faces of Sir Piers, Gralam, and Hamo successively met her eye. No time for greetings as they forced their way through the booths and interposed themselves between the Earl and

his persecutors. A fierce onslaught drove this rabble back maimed and howling, and our little party reached the stairs without further opposition. One circumstance in the short but final struggle perplexed Lettice. Sir Hugh Venables seemed ubiquitous. To the right, to the left, in front, in rear, his flashing blade and flashing eyes were visible.

‘There is wizardrie about him!’ exclaimed the Earl, divining her thought; then with a ringing laugh he added—

‘The riddle is made plain; here stands bold Hugh, Lord of Kynderton’s broad acres—yonder his cousin, bold Richard, the Saracens’ dread, and Rose of Chivalrie. Welcome, Sir Knight, back to this perturbed land of ours.’

Richard Venables and his cousin now found time to greet one another, and right joyful was the clasp of their mailed hands.

Richard had but just arrived from Falmouth, at which port he had landed from Spain. He and Sir Piers, old friends and fellow-soldiers under the Duke of York in France and Ireland, had casually met, and joined their fortunes as far as Westminster stairs, Sir Piers in search of Letitia, Richard intending to visit the aged

Baroness at the palace. This intention, however, he postponed an hour or two, persuading himself that it lay with his honour to see the Earl safe home; secretly attracted also by the sight of Letitia, the bright plaything and companion of his boyish years.

Lord Warwick's splendid barge lay at the foot of the stairs manned by rowers in scarlet, bright with fluttering pennon and pennoncelle, and with the Earl's guidon, 'powdered full of ragged staves,' decorating the prow. Two smaller boats were moored close by for his retainers. In one of these Parnel had taken refuge from the pressure of the mob.

Finding that the sharers of his late adventure were, like himself, bound for the Strand, he prayed them to take barge with him, and they were soon floating on the 'silent highway' towards their destination. Only Sir Hugh Venables remained behind, 'as in duty bound,' his cousin mirthfully said, 'to report of his safety to bright Mistress Eglanbie.'

The jest brought no answering smile, for Sir Hugh's dreams of love and joy had been troubled of late. A fitful melancholy had stolen over Eglanbie, and shown itself in caprice and reserve towards him. He had more than once

sought access to her in vain, and afterwards learnt that she had been closeted with the Duchess of Bedford, the woman in the whole court whom he most disapproved of. When pressed by him on this point that very morning, Eglanbie had proudly asserted her right to choose her own friends, and they had parted in anger.

‘Will she care to know me safe?’ thought the Baron. ‘Is her heart mine or is it not? Nay, but this very day I will know!’ So he returned to the palace and sought her out at once. But alas for the firmest resolves man can make! Eglanbie met him with bright smiles that seemed to plead for forgiveness; in their sunshine he forgot all grievances, asked no explanation of the past, exacted no promise for the future; and when, after an hour’s interview, he bade her farewell, she felt that he was more than ever her own.

To return to Lettice and her illustrious protector. After awhile the Earl grew silent and abstracted, shaping in his mind the course which this unlooked-for explosion would compel him to take. He rapidly resolved on setting out that same night to his Castle of Middleham in Yorkshire, and thence conveying his Countess and infant children to Calais. From

that impregnable stronghold, whose key he held in his hand, he would bring the proud Queen to a better mind, or know the reason why !

Silently the barge floated on till it came alongside of the Strand, with its many picturesque stairs leading up to noble mansions. They stood wide apart from each other, embosomed in orchards or groves of trees, which from this point concealed the mean hovels that clustered round them. Glimpses of the setting sun might now and then be caught, about to dip below the horizon, round as a shield, and red as a glowing bar of iron. It was not lost upon Lettice that the barge glided past Lord Warwick's own princely dwelling, known by the white bear and ragged staff floating in broad folds on its octagonal tower. By his command the rowers slacked not till they reached the stair (or bridge, as it was then called) opposite Lady Kynderton's humbler abode.

Here Cecily had stood an hour at least, much marvelling that her sister came not, much discomposed by strange rumours of a fray at Westminster, brought in a crude, disjointed manner by chance passers-by on the river. However, 'all is well that ends well'—the sisters were folded in one another's arms.

Letitice in enthusiastic gratitude had kissed the great Earl's hand, and prayed the 'good saints have a care of him,' with an earnestness she blushed a few moments later to think of. He, courteously commending the 'pale lilye flowere' to Cecily's care, waved an adieu, and was gone.

The weary girl was soon seated by a blazing hearth, and tended in loving and matronly fashion by her sister. She speedily revived, and was as glad to tell, as Cecily and Piers were eager to hear, the story of her escape. Richard Venables presently joined them, so cordial, so full of old and dear reminiscences of former times, that no one could consider him a stranger, and all the while Cecily's boy, now a year old, was springing and crowing in Letitia's arms, and exciting all the raptures that young aunts and mothers felt in the fifteenth century as much as now. So the afternoon passed, Cecily alternately listening to Letitia's details of her career at court, or in undertones relating the more tranquil passages of her own married life, varied, however, by occasional visits to Wigmore Castle and other great houses. Sir Piers had, in his turn, to tell of the bloody scenes in which he had taken part the year before, in the desolating Border warfare carried on between

Scotland and England. Much might Richard Venables have added, on his part,—

Of hairbreadth 'scapes in the imminent deadly breach,
And moving accidents by flood or field,

experienced in the south of France, or on the snowy sierras of Spain. And what little could be drawn from him was hearkened to with no indifferent ear; that which had caused suffering at the time brought enjoyment in the recital. Hours slipped away; the flame that had flickered on the ceiling, and lit up the Venables dragons on either side of the hearth, died down, and the clock of the dilapidated Savoy Palace* struck nine. The compline chime sounded from tower and belfry in every quarter. Oil lamps, protected by glass or horn, were placed in front of the wealthier mansions; and in the narrow streets through which Richard Venables threaded his way to his hostel, the cry of 'hang out your lights' was promptly responded to by the citizens. By the help of this feeble illumination he and other passers along reached their destinations safely, in spite of the many cutthroats and pickpurses who, in those unsettled times, sculked about London.

* This palace was almost destroyed by Wat Tyler and his adherents.

That first evening had, by one consent, been dedicated to joy and harmony. All painful subjects had been shunned, not from reserve, but from a half unconscious dread of forestalling the sorrows which all felt must be at hand. The next morning Lettice woke full two hours later than usual, and saw Cecily at her bedside, ready to offer the light breakfast of milk and fine wheaten cake they had shared in days gone by. She could not but observe that Cecily was paler than of yore, and that the little heart-shaped cap shaded cheeks that were already losing their girlish roundness; and when Lettice asked if Sir Piers were at home, her face became grave. 'No, he was gone out; he was at the King's Bench, according to his wont. She prayed he might speed well there.' Observing Lettice's look of surprise, her sister entered upon an explanation. 'Had not Lettice heard? had not she or Maurice writ to her of their late trouble? how that one John Cockayne, a far-removed cousin of the Holfordes, by the mother's side, had laid a claim to the Halsteds some three months before, and was leaving no stone unturned to wrest it from Piers. Great trouble and cost hath he already put us unto,' she added, 'and

he hath wrought upon the Duke of Buckingham, who is likewise Earl of Stafford, to back him in his claim, threatening us with a forcible ejection if we resist. Hal Nixon and his fellowship be sore afraid lest they should take us unawares, and have made great ordnance within the house, putting bars to bar the doors cross-wise, and wickets on every quarter of the house to shoot out at with bows and handguns. Likewise Piers is laying in good store of cross-bows and quarrelles,* but me hopeth it shall not come to that; for, though the Duke of Buckingham be strong, and hath hated Piers with a right good will ever since they crossed swords at St. Albans, yet the Lord of Audeley, lieutenant of our parts, is stronger, and will not see wrong done even to a Yorkist.'

'Maurice will help,' suggested Lettice, eagerly; but Lady Holforde shook her head.

'Alack! sweetheart, would it were so! but sooth must be said, and he and Piers be twain at this present. In his blind love for the Queen and all that doth to her appertain, Maurice cannot away with one who esteems her

* Square-headed arrows. For these and many other details, see *Paston Letters*, vol. iii. p. 315, &c.

less. All that Piers does is ill done in his eyes, and now they rarely meet. Yet,' she continued, the tears filling her eyes, 'Piers, though I say it who should not, hath been a faithful husband to Maurice's impoverished estate. I dare swear he hath nursed it more tenderly than ever he did his own, and specially now that two years of drought, blasted harvests, and heavy taxes have made the closest thrift needful. Maurice shall one day see this, I trust.'

Lettice sat upright, in dumb sorrow at this revelation, her sympathies divided, or rather distracted, between Piers whom she loved much, and Maurice whom she loved more. After a long pause Cecily spoke again, pursuing her own train of thought.

'Piers rode to the manor on Soulmas-day, and ordered all with Sir Armine for the continuance of the month-mind* for our dear grandfather. The land hath been legally made over for this purpose, and Sir Armine will see to its reverent performance in our chantry. He and his very trusty good friend, Sir Lucas, the vicar, have advised thereupon together.'

* A commemoration of the dead, then usual.

‘And how fares it with good Sir Armine?’
Lettice asked.

‘But poorly, alas! They say he droopeth
amain, feeding much on sad thoughts and pro-
gnostications touching the miseries and wicked-
ness of this our land; yet doth he labour day
and night in his vocation, only of late a sharp
fit of sickness hath hindered him; but for this
he had now been in London, helping the un-
happy Bishop Pecock, whose deadly strait ye
wot of.’

A happy diversion to gloomy topics now pre-
sented itself in the shape of the baby Waryn.
He entered, enthroned in the arms of Parnel,
whose youth seemed renewed as she held in her
embrace the first-born of her foster-son. His
infant gaze was riveted by her towering head-
gear, shrivelled animated features, and shrill,
cheery tones. She proclaimed him, in a breath,
‘her bird, her honey-bee, her crownèd king,
her popinjay, the joy of her eld, the very re-
flexion of his knightly father, in eye, lip, and
carriage, and might he, by Jesu’s grace, prove
like him in worship, wit, and gentleness!’ All
this homage the heir of the Holfordes received
as his due, listening to it with head erect,
smiling dark eyes, and one mottled hand rest-

ing on the old woman's shoulder ; but at the sight of his mother his face lighted up instantaneously, and he bounded from Parnel's hold into her outstretched arms.

'My little man,' she said, 'how can I grieve at aught while I have thee so flygge and fair? But come away with me, poppet, for thou and I do rather hinder than help Aunt Lettice in her arraying.'

Sir Piers returned home in better spirits than heretofore about his suit, and imparted to Cecily his hope that by the end of the next week they might be free to leave London. Sir Hugh Venables and his train, Sir William Trowtbecke, his two sons and daughter, Richard Venables, and others, purposed travelling north at that time ; 'and,' he added, 'they be urgent to have you and Lettice of their company, as it is said there goeth many thieves betwixt this and Chester.' His own movements were uncertain, doubly so since the crash caused by the attempt on Earl Warwick's life. Richard Venables returned from a visit to his grandmother full of court conjectures on the subject. I need hardly say they were not picked up from the discreet and conscientious Baroness, nor did he learn them from Eglanbie Trowt-

becke, whose silent reserve had chilled and disappointed him; but from other acquaintances in the palace he heard of the Queen's unbounded anger at the Earl's escape, and bitter invectives against him. Not content with stifling all inquiry as to her servants' share of the guilt, she sent officers to arrest Lord Warwick, and lodge him in the Tower.* His flight into Yorkshire saved him from this indignity; and now his aged but energetic father, the Earl of Salisbury, after vainly demanding redress, was preparing to follow him thither, with vengeance in his heart and on his lips. Richard Venables, who had served under Salisbury several years in France, was deeply affected by the recital of his wrongs; and as he told them again, paced the chamber in uncontrollable agitation. He was the bearer of a letter from the Lady Kynderton to Lettice. Her share in yesterday's fray had been reported to the Queen; and though a passive one, had still further strengthened the ill-feeling against her; any intercession in her behalf, therefore, would for the present be worse than useless, but Lettice might rest assured she should not

* FABYAN'S *Chronicle*.

be forgotten ; and meanwhile, added the Baroness in a strain unwontedly mournful, ‘ I count those happiest, my daughter, which have least to do with the court. Our life being but a thoroughfare and full of woe, and no man knowing how soon he may be called hence, they walk freest whose feet be not bound with these golden fetters. Yet, perchance, in this I write amiss, and from the sourness of a perturbed spirit ; for truly this fray and the woful consequences to flow from it have ravished my wits, and made me full heavily disposed.’

By the appointed day Sir Piers’ legal matters were put in good train, and he himself was on his way to Calais on a confidential errand. Cecily also had completed to her satisfaction her winter purchases. They consisted of dates and almonds, ginger and oranges, raisins of Corinth, murrey-coloured cloth for liveries, at three shillings the yard, a ‘ garnish or two ’ of pewter ewers, basins and candlesticks, and last, not least, good store of frieze for Waryn’s winter coats, and of fine scarlet cloth for his holiday suit. These and other important matters being happily transacted, the sisters felt more pleasure than regret at the prospect of speedily quitting the capital.

CHAPTER II.

OF THE TWINS.

Few are the hearts whence one same touch
 Bids the sweet fountains flow.

FELICIA HEMANS.

The bloody-minded queen
 That led calm Henry, though he were a king,
 As doth a sail filled with a fretting gust
 Command an argosy to stem the waves!

SHAKSPEARE.

WE have seen a picture by the hand of a great master in which the Seasons are represented performing their mystic dance to the sound of music played by Time. So full of airy grace and blithe expression are the figures, that we seem to see them move, and hear the jubilant strain that gives wings to their feet.

It is not often, however, except in the bright region of fancy, that the seasons follow one another thus gaily; and at the epoch of which our domestic chronicle treats, they lagged

heavily along, mistrust, anxiety, and fear clogging their nimble feet. The winter was spent by Lancastrians and Yorkists in strenuous, though secret endeavours to strengthen their respective parties. Warwick remained at Calais, sullen, but not inactive, and he kept up a close correspondence with his father in Yorkshire, and with the Duke of York at Wigmore, or at his Castle of Sandal near Wakefield. So menacing did his power, and that of the Nevills appear in the spring of 1459, that Queen Margaret resolved upon making a royal progress through the counties of Warwick, Stafford, and Chester, with a view of counteracting their influence and of restoring the King's decayed popularity. Sylvan sports, for the benefit of his infirm health, were made the pretext for this journey.

They set forth in the month of June, accompanied by the Prince of Wales; and as London and the refractory Londoners were left behind, the Queen's spirits rose, and with them increased her affability and power of captivating all hearts.

Many of the Lancastrian lords in those shires joyfully prepared to receive the royal travellers. The Yorkist chiefs held back, not

so much from disaffection to the King, whom they still uniformly regarded as their liege sovereign, but from distrust of Margaret. This feeling had been a thousand-fold aggravated by the fray at the palace; 'a *fracas*,' says Miss Strickland, 'which, whether originating in design or accident, occurred in fatal hour for the Queen, by affording a plausible excuse to the great triumvirs of the adverse party for drawing the sword against the House of Lancaster. Never again was it sheathed till it had drunk the life-blood of those dearest to Margaret, her husband and her son.'

From Coventry to Coleshill, and thence by Tamworth to Eccleshall, the royal party advanced slowly northwards. Their next resting place was to be Helegh Castle, and on the day before that fixed for their arrival, an unusual degree of bustle and activity pervaded the neighbourhood. Royal servants hurrying forward with orders, relays of horses sent by the neighbouring gentry for their majesties' use, knights and esquires hastening to pay their dutiful homage, besides a throng of loyal or curious spectators, jugglers, and musickers, choked the highways and byways. The excitement reached even to the Halsteds, though

situated several miles from the beaten track, and every able-bodied person about the establishment went forth to catch a view of the royal procession or some stray member of it. Even Gillian set out with her babe in her arms, intending to go but a mile or two and return home in milking time. She had tried to persuade her uncouth brother-in-law, Rob Wantwit, then a guest at the Halsteds, to accompany her; but he vehemently declared he would not, and finally slunk away to gather millefoil (the herb now called yarrow) in the neighbouring pastures. By the brook he met Mistress Lettice, who had wandered forth, moody and restless as himself.

Six months had elapsed since her adventurous exit from Westminster, and, to her keen mortification, no message of recal had been sent to her. The good offices of the Lady Kynderton had proved unavailing. Margaret, identifying Lettice with the cause of Warwick, and further displeased by hearing of her residence under the roof of a Yorkist brother-in-law, would not have her so much as named; and the infant Prince, with childish elasticity, had turned to other companions, some of whom humoured him more, though they loved him less.

The impetuous girl felt this neglect acutely ; she missed the stir and splendour, the friendships and rivalries of that brilliant and frivolous court. Its levity had infected her, though from its deeper corruptions, God and His true servant, the aged Baroness, had happily shielded her. The Halsteds, though a peaceful home, and brightened by frequent visits from Richard Venables, did not satisfy the cravings of her spirit. Six weeks spent with Maurice at Dutton, and Helegh, and at Utkinton Hall, the Cheshire residence of their kinsman Sir John Done had brought some relief; but on her return to Cecily, the waywardness re-appeared, and with it a tinge of bitterness against Sir Piers, imbibed from Maurice. Piers was often away, and when at home much occupied, so the fluctuations fell harmless as far as he was concerned ; or, if he perceived them, he blamed himself, and wondered, with a sigh, whether he were indeed of a nature hard and rough, or whether the times had made him so. Then he would think to cheer her by proposing a day's hawking by the Tern, and a gush of the old love and unreserve would return between them. At such times she might even jest with him and Richard Venables on

the awfully real subject of politics, and shake her head unreprieved at the white rose in their bonnets, for Richard could not, and Sir Piers would not, find any fault in her.

Rob's companionship was not without its sting to-day ; he had been at the Halsteds a fortnight, and Sir Armine, with kindly thought for Lettice as well as for Rob, had commended him specially to her care.

'Ye shall do a good work, daughter,' he had written, 'in teaching this infirm lad ; he can already say the Paternoster and Ten Hestes in our mother tongue, not without some such glimpse of their meaning as God doth sometimes vouchsafe to His simple ones. It remaineth to perfect him in the Credo, the which he shall liefer learn from your lips than from another's.'

Thus urged, she had set about the duty zealously, and with signal success ; but, alas ! after a few days the excitement of novelty went off ; Sir Piers and Richard Venables returned to the Halsteds, bringing a fresh current of ideas with them, and by degrees the task of teaching was omitted or deputed to the more patient Cecily. So not unremorsefully did Lettice watch the idiot as he lay on the grass peering intently into the stream.

‘What seest thou there, Rob?’ she said at last.

‘I see the waters run red,’ he muttered, without looking up.

‘Mere craze,’ she answered; ‘thy brain is bewitched by that strange story Hal telleth of the bloody shower that fell last Dunstan’s-day in Bedford.’

‘The waters run red,’ he persisted, ‘blood red, and do give forth a tolling like passing bells.’

‘Tush, Rob, speak not so wildly,’ she said; ‘here all is peace. Silver bright floweth the brook, crested with sparkles. Silver sweet sound its many voices as it courseth onward toward Bloreheath. So shall it run, and never cease, till winter bind it fast in icy chains.’

Rob looked earnestly, wistfully, in her face.

‘Ere yonder elms be yellow,’ he answered, ‘it shall have ceased to run, choked with the bodies of the slain.’ He rose, and was shuffling away at a rapid pace when she laid her hand on his shoulder.

‘Rob, thy words, though meaningless, chill me with unknown fears. Speak again, strange boy, for the love of Mary, speak comfortably, an thou canst, for these horrible imaginings freeze up my soul.’

‘Ah, me,’ cried Rob, ‘comfort is none.’ He buried his head between his knees, trying to shut out the visions that would crowd upon his inward eye. Presently he raised it again, and with a softened look went on:—

‘Said I comfort was none? Blessed Son of Mary, forgive that I so belied Thee. Of whom speak the words of grace thine own lips taught me, lady? Speak they not of Him which ‘suffrid passion, rose fro’ deathe to lyfe, sitteth in the hevenes?’ Speak they not of ‘forgiveness, agen-risyng, lyfe everlasting?’ lady, when thy tears shall drop faster than autumn rain into this brook, think of these words, and thou shalt not lack comfort.’

Neither spoke again; and they rambled on, picking wild flowers as they went, till the sun was low in heaven; then Lettice turned, and her uncouth guardian with her.

Not a creature did they meet on moor or in meadow. At the bottom of the Halstedsgarden grew a thick copse, screening a little door in the wall, of which Lettice possessed the key. She made towards it, but saw with surprise in the shade of the trees near it a cloaked figure holding two horses, and himself mounted on a stout nag. She pushed on to

the door, which was concealed from observation by the trunk of an old hollow oak. Here she came upon two men, who were so busy examining its fastenings that they did not hear her approach. A whistle from their confederate in the wood made them look round, and they confronted Lettice and her strange companion. Nothing abashed were they at their detection, and their apparel and saucy carriage convinced her that they were no private thieves, but retainers of some great lord, a class of men then notorious for unbridled insolence. Though startled, she neither turned back nor betrayed the slightest fear, but deliberately applied her key to the door, and pushed it open.

‘Keep close, Rob,’ she said, passing through and locking the door behind her.

A bold stare from the men was the only notice she received; but they were less forbearing towards Rob, whose aspect and gait provoked a volley of smothered gibes and laughter.

He looked over the wall, and growled fiercely at them :—

‘Laugh, my masters, ay, laugh while ye may. Ere Barnaby bright have twice come round, ye and your duke shall lie in one bloody shroud.

Lettice ran to acquaint Sir Piers with this suspicious rencontre. She found him and Richard Venables just dismounting from their horses ; but they sprang upon them again, and set forth in search of the spies. Nothing, however, was to be seen but the distant outline of three horsemen flying across the moor. From their appearance, the direction they took, and other circumstances previously known to him, Sir Piers conjectured them retainers of his enemy Buckingham, who, as Earl of Stafford, was attending upon the Queen through those parts. This lord being openly favourable to John Cockayne in his iniquitous lawsuit with Piers, it became incumbent upon the latter to redouble his watchfulness, lest a forcible entry into the Halsteds should be attempted. Such proceedings were common in those days, when civil war at once sharpened men's rapacity, and paralysed the arm of the law. So, after short consultation with his friend, Sir Piers repaired at once to Hal Nixon's abode, which stood about a bow-shot from his gate, and discussed with his trusty verderer the best means of defence.

Cecily, meanwhile, was in her bower receiving unexpected guests. Early in the even-

ing—such a balmy evening as June often brings—a mounted party, consisting of two young gentlemen and their servants, had presented themselves at the gate. They were forthwith admitted; and the taller of the two led the way through the hall, buttery, and other apartments, and introduced his companions by a small postern-door to the garden, where Hamo told them Lady Holforde was to be found. It was a pleasant square inclosure, kept with greater care than was often seen in that rude age. Beds of sweet herbs converged towards a dial which marked the centre. Round its stem grew a tangle of rosebushes, white and red, intertwining their branches lovingly. The rest of the garden, or rather, orchard, was studded with cherry and other fruit-trees, that gave promise of a plentiful crop by-and-by. To the eye of a modern horticulturist, the poverty of the land would have appeared extreme; no potatoes or turnips, no pease or beans, no currants or gooseberries were there, for these and many other vegetable productions now enjoyed by every cottager, were then unknown, or only imported as a luxury from Flanders. Flowers, too, were of few and not choice kinds; for it was not till a century later

that they began to be cultivated for their own sweet sakes, independently of distilling or medicinal purposes.

Cecily's garden enclosure was bounded on two sides by a low stone wall and sunk fence. The house stood on the south side of it, and on the east it was fenced in by such a box hedge as Chaucer describes—

Thick as a castle wall,
That who that list without to stand or go,
Tho' he would all day pry-en to and fro,
He should not see if there were any wight
Within or no . . . wreathen so cunningly,
That every branch and leaf grew by measure.

This verdant wall was nine or ten feet high, and another scarcely half that height ran parallel with it, only divided by a narrow strip of smooth shaven turf, a pleasant and fragrant walk on summer evenings, especially after the box had been clipped. The eye was regaled by a tranquil home view of green meadows, through which a brook had worked its own deep bed, and ran swiftly towards the little river Tern, a tributary of the Trent. The hedges were united at the further end by an arbour, 'well y-wrought' by the neat-handed Hal Nixon, furnished with benches, and paved with fresh

urves. Here sat Cecily, with no companion but her boy, enjoying the quietness of the evening, and soothed by the hum of her rude pinning-wheel, which was in full activity. She looked up as her visitors drew near. The one was Piers Dutton, Sir Thomas's eldest son, a frank, merry-hearted lad of fifteen; Maurice was the other, shot up since we last saw him into a tall young man, with more of the willow than the oak in his slight figure, and with features of girlish delicacy, yet free from effeminacy. There was a mixture of joy and embarrassment in the greeting of the brother and sister; but in Maurice the latter prevailed, as he asked with some abruptness if Piers were at home.

‘Either he is, or will be anon,’ Cecily said. ‘He and Richard Venables rode this morning to Stafford to pay their duty to his Majesty.’

‘Indeed, be they so loyal?’ Maurice rejoined, all pleased; ‘why, Piers Dutton, these gallants have outstripped thee and me in the race of loyalty! and the Queen, Cecily, what degree of observance do they vouchsafe to her?’

‘Such observance as true-hearted gentlemen pay to a woman,’ she said; ‘Piers is incapable

of aught else, how bitterly soever he may mourn the Queen's rash wilfulness; but, oh! dear Maurice,' she added, lowering her voice; 'one word ere Piers comes (and I hear his horse's hoofs even now), one brief prayer let me make to thee—urge not his patience too far. If thou have grievances, speak them plainly, for he loveth frank dealing, and will answer truth with truth; but vex him not by those keen darts of sarcasm thy ready wit is so apt to let fly; they be ungenerous, Maurice, therefore not worthy of thee.'

'Nay, sister mine,' he answered, forcing a laugh; 'if a few random words, no sooner said than rued, cut so deep, what shall Piers deem of me when he knows what I have done? Truly, should he rave and storm at me, for a graceless unthrift, 'twere no marvel.'

'What have you done, brother?' Cecily asked, tremulously; and receiving no answer, she went on: 'Piers hath boded mischief, and so have I, from many signs lately; from thy strange avoidance of us these three months—ever since, indeed, thou didst visit the court at Easter; from the mystery that hath hung about thy doings, and from Lettice's moody reserve; specially hath Piers been disquieted by thy

growing friendship with the wild galliard, Adam de Trowtbecke, whose profligate undutifulness is breaking his father's heart.'

'Call it not friendship,' Maurice answered, with a look of disgust; 'Adam hath been, I confess it, my boon companion, mine adviser too often, but never my friend.'

'With that belief Piers doth comfort himself,' replied Cecily: 'he saith that light and darkness cannot be more opposed than thy truth and his fickle frowardness, thy loyalty and his base self-seeking.'

'I owe him thanks for this good word,' exclaimed Maurice; 'and now 'tis too late, wish I had hearkened to him rather than to Adam. Hear me, Cecily; 'twas Adam whose ill persuasion wrought on me to quit Lord Audeley's service so soon as my three-years' duty expired. He urged me to show myself mine own master, and wear no colours but my own! Fool that I was, I did his bidding, thereby cooling the fatherly kindness of the best lord that ever was.'

Maurice paused. They were alone, for Piers Dutton had immediately gone in quest of his favourite, Letitia; but Cecily hesitated what to say next, scarcely knowing how to avail herself of the unwonted confidence. Lettice, his twin,

had been the chosen recipient of Maurice's thoughts from childhood, the sharer of his day-dreams, the fomentor of his passionate Lancastrian zeal. Cecily, though dearly loved, had been content to take a second place, and, since her marriage with a Yorkist, there had been a further restraint in their intercourse. The bitter feuds of those times, which brought a chill to many a happy hearth, had told upon theirs. Piers at times was tempted to turn from Maurice as incorrigibly self-willed, Maurice shunned Piers, and deemed him stern and unsympathizing.

Now was the golden opportunity, Cecily thought, for bringing them together; and she must not, through over-zeal or over-timidity, miss it. So she took both Maurice's hands in hers, and said, 'Tell me all.'

'Look thus in my face,' he answered, 'thus wistfully, as our mother used to look, and I will tell thee all.'

The rapid confession followed. He had parted from Lord Audeley in Easter week, and, while debating whither to betake himself, had encountered Adam de Trowtbecke. They went together to London in the first instance. Sir Adam was at this time at open variance with

his father ; a circumstance which affected him the less, as through his mother, one of the wealthy house of Stanley, he had inherited a considerable estate. This enabled him to gather around him several hundred retainers, armed, clothed, and maintained at his own expense. He foresaw that civil war was at hand, and having no fixed principles, was prepared, like many other gentlemen of the time, to throw himself on the winning side, whichever it might be. At that moment the Red Rose was in the ascendant, so, with a brave retinue at his back, he presented himself before Queen Margaret. She received him most favourably, and lavished upon him those blandishments and tokens of favour she knew so well how to bestow. ' He was her good, her loyal knight,' she said, ' prop and stay of her cause in her good county of Chester.' Then she wept, and said she had never greater need of friends than now that traitors were at work to overturn the throne.

Maurice stood by unnoticed, but his heart burned within him at the sight of the beautiful and distressed Queen. She read these feelings in the flushed cheek and ingenuous brow, and artfully worked upon them ; withdrawing the

hand he humbly knelt to kiss, she turned away with an air of marked coldness. She briefly and bitterly alluded to Cecily's marriage and Letitia's alienation, and asked whether Maurice meant to forsake her too? Eagerly did he assure her, in reply, of his loyalty and that of his house, and of Letitia's undiminished faith and truth. Still she demurred, and Maurice, stung to the quick, swore 'on the hilt of his father's sword' to live and die in her cause. Then, like sunshine after storm, beamed upon him the smile of transcendent beauty which bewitched whoever basked in it.

'Meet me, young gentleman,' she said, extending her hand, 'by Midsummer-day, in our city of Chester, and bring with you such an array of stout hearts and hands as our friend Sir Adam hath here mustered.'

Intoxicated with delight and with a mixture of feelings in which flattered vanity and awakened chivalry were strangely mingled, Maurice left the royal presence. Before his loyal delirium had time to calm down he found himself, under Sir Adam's auspices, in treaty with a noted Jewish usurer—for there were Shylocks even then—for the monies requisite to equip and maintain a hundred men.

How ruinous this bargain proved may easily be imagined, though we confess ourselves unable exactly to specify its terms, or the process by which it was brought to a conclusion. Sir Adam vouched for Maurice's being heir to an estate of which in two years he would be master, and with seeming generosity laid down a considerable sum as earnest for the payment of the rest. The next step was to find the men, for but a small number could be furnished by Maurice's Cheshire estate, and of these not one without Sir Piers' leave. Here again Adam de Trowtbecke came to the rescue, and in a few days Maurice's retinue was completed. 'Proper fellows,' Sir Adam called them; but, in truth, they were a motley crew, with little recommendation beyond the 'swashing and martial outside' they wore. Maurice felt some lurking uneasiness, and on examining more minutely into the qualifications of his new serving-men, found, with indignation, that Sir Adam had transferred to him some of the most troublesome of his own retainers. In fiery haste he flew to his treacherous friend, and upbraided him with this meanness.

They quarrelled, and crossed swords, but were happily parted before either had received

much scathe. Now Maurice's debt to Sir Adam hung like a clog around him, and in his extremity he took pen in hand and poured out his wrongs and distresses to Lettice. The 'special post' despatched on horseback with this letter happily proved trusty, and in an incredibly short space returned to London, bearing a casket and a letter, with 'haste, haste, haste' added to the superscription. The letter overflowed with sympathy; the casket contained fifty gold angels, all Lettice's store of money, and all her jewels and valuables besides. With drooping head and unsteady voice Maurice told of Lettice's generosity, and his cheeks burnt as he went on to relate how, in his sore need, penniless himself, and wholly at Sir Adam's mercy, he had disposed of the jewels to a goldsmith in Chepe. Three hundred marks—the price they fetched—was just sufficient to pay the debt; and so Sir Adam and he had parted, with scorn on one side and rancour on the other. The court having left London, no rumour reached it of this disgraceful transaction.

Maurice's retinue was now at Stafford, where he was to join them that evening; but he must wait for Piers first, and own to him how matters

stood. Would that Piers had been by (Cecily thought) to hear the candid though humiliating statement he had poured into her ear! while she stood aghast at his folly and recklessness—at the poverty he had entailed upon himself for years—at the defeat of all her husband's wise and kindly plans for his good—still she could feel thankful that matters were not worse. He had been kept free from baseness, from vice, from any stain on his honour; he had happily shaken off Sir Adam's blighting influence. This sharp lesson, and the shame with which Lettice's ready self-sacrifice had filled him, were working better thoughts and resolves, and soon she trusted would

Consideration come,
And whip the offending spirit out of him.

Piers now joined them, but not alone; Lettice and Richard Venables were with him, and Hal Nixon, all in deep consultation as to the defences of the house.

Old Parnel, who had entered the harbour with a view to carrying off Childe Waryn to his cradle-bed, lingered with the babe in her arms in hopes of obtaining a word or glance from Master Maurice. Her contemptuous curiosity was also aroused by seeing Rob

Wantwit advancing towards the group, his hair more lank, and his 'lacklustre eye' more vacant than usual. He had been sent for to furnish some clue as to the intruders who had crossed Mistress Letitia's path that evening, his fierce invective against them having led to the supposition that he knew who they were; but either the words had been shot at random, or the flash of prophetic light had died away, leaving his mind dark and void. Not a syllable could be extracted from him by Lettice's persuasions, or Hal's threats of the cudgel—threats which had indeed lost much of their efficacy, from the circumstance of Gillian's invariably begging the offender off. So he was dismissed, and shambled away, only pausing to steal a look at Babe Waryn; a look of such intense, watchful affection as one sometimes sees a sheep-dog bestow on some cottage-child entrusted to his charge. Old Parnel bridled, frowned, and drew a corner of her mantle round her nursing to 'save him,' she muttered, 'from the evil eye yon lubberly elf doth cast upon him!' But the babe was the better physiognomist of the two. With bright glance and crow, he peeped from behind his screen, and held out

for admiration his dimpled arms, decked with daisy-chains of Lettice's weaving. Rob gazed awhile in speechless ecstasy, then a shudder crept over him, and he fled, gasping forth in scarcely intelligible accents—

‘ The Marguerite-flower ! the blood-stained Marguerite-flower ! oh, see, her crown is all bedropped with crimson, the life-blood of the fairest, noblest in this land !’

Rob's ravings were unheeded amid the welcomes now showered upon Maurice. A flush of shame mingled with his joy at seeing Lettice ; and to hide his agitation, he drained at a draught the goblet of Vernon wine poured out for him by Cecily. Sir Piers, little prone to suspicion, did not observe that Maurice avoided his eye ; nor blame the high, boyish spirits that made him talk and laugh more than his wont. The knight seemed, indeed, glad to be beguiled from his own thoughts, and laughed heartily over Maurice's quaint recital of his travelling adventures. He told with much humour of a burly friar (such an one as Chaucer describes), ‘ a wanton and a merry,’ and ‘ the best beggar of all his house,’ whom he had rescued on Barnet Heath from

the hands of St. Nicholas's clerks. Then he described a 'doctour of physicke' with whom he had joined company for several miles; a man learned in surgery, and the then kindred lore of natural magic and the planets. This sapient 'practisour' had discoursed much of a feat in chirurgery lately practised abroad, by which a patient with diseased sight had had both his eyes abstracted from his head and a new pair inserted! This notable cure was the subject of much discussion among our party; some of whom were disposed at first to be sceptical, but soon came round to the opinion that by the aid of occult lore the thing might be done!

From these abstruse topics they descended to the gossip of the day and the approaching marriage of Sir Thomas Dutton's two eldest daughters with the heirs of Molineux and Sotheworth, young gentlemen of mark and good repute. This double wedding was to be celebrated at Chester on Midsummer-day, together with that of Eglanbie Trowtbecke and the Baron of Kynderton, which Queen Margaret had promised to grace with her presence.

Then Maurice produced one of several letters

received by him while in London from John Dutton. They contained little besides minute directions to his tailor concerning a suit he had ordered for the aforesaid weddings.

‘Let the gown,’ he wrote, ‘be of a goodly scarlet red, purpled with gold and seed-y-pearl, and I pray you see the slashes be not too wide, otherwise the sleeve shall not sit handsomely. I would have the daisy-flower in fair broidery on the instep of either shoe. And for the hat, the fashion whereof I writ in my two last, if ye have a man of trust with you whose head is of mean size, let him bring the hat upon his head, for fear of misfashioning of it. For the richness of the suit spare not, since, having neither wife nor babes to purvey for (the Heavens be praised thereof), I have no need to stint me in such gear.’

The mirthful sallies which this ungallant sentiment drew forth subsided into sadness as Sir Piers and Richard Venables related their interview of that morning with the King. Queen Margaret was absent hunting on Cannock Chase. Henry, though passionately fond of field sports, his chief mundane relief from fits of melancholy, had remained at Stafford

that day to celebrate with fast and prayer the vigil of St. Barnabas. He had spent the morning in visiting every shrine and altar in the place, and was about to enter the exquisite little Norman church of St. Chad when the knights and their followers rode up. They dismounted, and bending the knee, tendered their homage, which was received by Henry with tranquil benignity. They then attended him into the church, and knelt awhile in the shadow of its massive chancel-arch, rich with the rude mouldings that marked the period of its construction. On issuing forth from the sacred edifice they again did lowly reverence, and departed. Richard Venables proceeded to Stafford Castle, where he obtained a few moments' interview with his kinswoman, the Lady of Kynderton. He then rejoined Sir Piers, and they rode home, much moved with the 'meek usurper's' bearing, his child-like innocence, heavenly charity, and manifest and total unfitness to occupy a throne.

After long silence Richard Venables turned to his friend, and said, abruptly :—

'Piers, were the strange freaks of destiny to lodge yon holy king in a cloister, methinks he were happier than now. He is more fit to

wield the censer than the sceptre, to be England's bedesman with the Most High than her crowned sovereign.'

A silent gesture of assent was the only reply.

Cecily's arbour had seldom witnessed a more animated conversation than took place that evening; and though, questionless, each individual of the company, except the boy Piers Dutton, was conscious of some secret achings of the heart, yet with one consent they put them by for the morrow. The sisters sat side by side on the turf bench, and Maurice, stretched at their feet, had stolen one arm round Letitia's slender waist. Sir Piers and his two guests had stationed themselves at the entrance of the bower. A sunset flush lit up the western horizon on which they gazed, and filled the air overhead with rosy cloudlets. In the pauses that now began to occur in the conversation they heard the 'knell of parting day' sounded from Drayton church-tower. Flights of rooks were settling down in the group of elms opposite, and merle and mavis were trilling their evensong in the fruit-trees close at hand.

The stillness was broken by Richard Venables, who with a sudden start turned to Letitia.

‘Marry, fairest mistress,’ he said, ‘I had all but forgot a packet my reverend kinswoman charged me withal for you. ’Tis a carcanet, or some such device, to be worn at the forthcoming bridal.’

So saying he produced from his gypsire of cloth of gold a little silken bag, secured with silken twist, and laid it before Lettice.

‘Whatever it be,’ she answered, ‘the kindly remembrance of the gracious giver will make it dear to me.’

She was laying the packet aside for future inspection when young Dutton drew near.

‘Good Lettice, pretty Lettice,’ he said, ‘be entreated, and show us the gaud now. I have enough of mine Uncle John about me to love the sight of such bravery.’

‘Simple boy,’ she replied, laughing, ‘thy request shall be granted for reasons twain; ’tis easy to perform, and jumps with mine own wish.’

Richard’s keen-edged dagger cut the twist, and Lettice, with speechless confusion, drew from within the bag a golden ornament of great price, one of the most costly of the trinkets she had parted with for Maurice’s sake. It was a net to enclose the hair, so peculiar in form and

texture as to be at once recognised beyond the possibility of mistake. Its meshes were formed of the most delicate gold chainwork, and at each intersection was a rich boss, on which was engraved the sacred monogram, 'I. H. S.'

All present, except Richard, remembered the beautiful trinket well; and Sir Piers drew near to examine it, as it dropped from Lettice's trembling fingers to her knee. His surprise was increased by the sight of her face, down-cast and mantling with blushes. There was a pause, then Richard said:—

'I remember me now! the Queen's jeweller, rich Master Simon, from Chepe, met her at Warwick by her Highness's desire; 'twas in his hand my kinswoman espied this gaud, and from him she redeemed it, much marvelling by what hap it had come into his possession.'

'Lost, questionless it must have been,' observed Sir Piers, as if accounting to himself for a circumstance at the first blush perplexing; 'lost, and doubtless carried as a waif to the rich goldsmith.'

Cecily guessed at his thought, but knew not how to acquit Lettice in his eyes without hurrying on humiliating disclosures touching

Maurice's conduct ; so she rose, merely saying—

‘ Come, let us to the house, the sun hath set behind Bloreheath, and night-damps rise on every side.’

But Lettice was too ingenuous to shelter herself behind the excuse devised for her by her brother-in-law.

‘ The trinket was not lost, Piers,’ she said ; then dropped the subject.

Quick as light the idea flashed through his mind that Lettice must have sold the ornament to relieve herself from some pressing pecuniary strait during her residence at court. How else account for her burning confusion, or for the fact of the trinket, an heirloom from her mother, being in the goldsmith's hands ? ‘ ’Twas passing strange,’ for Lettice had never been permitted to lack supplies, adequate, and more than adequate, to her needs, even in that prodigal court. Piers had always made this his first care ; he knew her to be heedless and impulsive, but he had also ever found her true, and the bare suspicion that she had not dealt candidly with him, that his kindness had been met by concealment or deceit, brought the keenest annoyance. No ; he would

not harbour the thought ; in spite of the contaminating influences of an artful Queen and intriguing courtiers, Lettice was guileless still. So he walked on musingly, with darkened brow.

But, ere he had gone many paces, his arm was vehemently grasped by Maurice.

‘Hearken, Piers,’ he cried, in a voice tremulous, yet defiant ; ‘thou wrongest Lettice by that thought ; bend that frown on me, for I am the unthrift.’

Sir Piers stopped short, perusing with wonder the flushed features, which even now had beamed with mirth and good-fellowship. Steadfast almost to stubbornness himself, he could little comprehend the mercurial temper Maurice inherited from his unstable father, and possibly from his Burgundian ancestors. It was too much akin to French levity to find favour in the eyes of a sturdy Englishman ; and perhaps a touch of scorn in his voice betrayed this, as he made answer :—

‘Unwind me these riddles, brother ; for much I have to hear, seeing that from Pasquetide till now thou hast neither spoken nor writ to me. Yet stay,’ he continued, marking Maurice’s increasing irritation ; ‘speak not

here, while so many eyes be upon us—not now, while thy young hot blood is stirred by some cause I may not guess.’

Self-reproach, hurt vanity, false shame, had goaded Maurice into that mood of mind when a calm reply is more chafing than any outburst of wrath.

‘By your favour,’ he said, ‘it shall be here, and now; I would have each and all of this fair company know my Lettice free of blame; faultless, unless too great love for me, unworthy, be a fault.’

He paused, and Sir Piers’ face grew bright.

‘Yonder ornament,’ pursued Maurice, ‘and every other she possessed, did Lettice give to help me at a great strait and pinch.’

‘And you did take them?’ asked Piers.

‘‘Ay, there’s the rub,’’ he answered; ‘I took them, and sold them to Simon of Chepe; there thou hast me, Piers.’

‘He doth belie himself, Piers,’ interposed Letitia; ‘in sooth he doth; ’twas on no private end he lavished his store——’

She faltered, remembering that the cause of Margaret of Anjou was one with which Piers could feel no sympathy.

‘Speak on, Lettice, speak on,’ cried the

reckless boy ; ‘murder will out ; nor could I, if I would, conceal that I have now one hundred stout men-at-arms at my beck, ready to back the Queen’s quarrel with bill, bow, and lance.’

Sir Piers turned to Cecily for explanation.

‘Is this mere raving, or something more?’ he asked.

‘Alas ! it is sad earnest,’ she replied, fixing her eyes on the ground ; ‘that false evil-doer, Adam Trowtbecke, hath so far beguiled his youth, but not, I trust, corrupted his heart. Give him a patient hearing, Piers, for my sake.’

‘For thy sake, sweet ? That is a binding adjuration, and in sooth much needed. The rash blaze of youthful riot I could pardon, but this wrong done to Lettice, this long concealment, and now the flint and hardness of his fault ! Nay, by my halidame, ’twould vex a saint.’

There was a pause, Sir Piers struggling to preserve patience, Maurice hardening himself in pride. In vain Lettice hung about him, and whispered, ‘Brother, brother, speak to Piers ; anger not him who is in the place of father to thee !’

He stood aloof, sullenly irresolute. Richard Venables, who had hitherto kept silence, now laid his hand on Maurice's shoulder, and said—

‘Young sir, pardon my freedom, and bear with me while I say true knightliness lies not in such stubborn bearing. The loftiest spirit may stoop to own a fault, and be thereby nothing degraded.’

‘Fair sir, I thank you for your counsel,’ Maurice replied, not without some touch of deference; ‘and would follow it had I aught of excuse to plead which this knight were likely to accept. But so long as he thinketh scorn of our matchless Queen, the immortal Daisy-flower whom I and all true hearts worship, what concord of spirit can be between us twain?’

The knight's enforced patience now gave way.

‘Marry come up,’ he said; ‘am I to learn my duty from a beardless boy? Methought, Richard Venables, thou and I had shed some blood in our King's quarrels ere this springald could whip a top or shoot pellets of clay from a hollow kex!’ Sir Piers checked himself sud-

denly, for irony is ever foreign to a generous nature.

‘Maurice,’ he resumed, ‘I see thee panting to be gone, and in sooth had liefer commune with thee another day, when both our spirits shall be cooler; but one thing, rash youth, let me say ere we part. Had it seemed good to thee to call together thy Cheshire men-at-arms in her behalf whom *thou* deemest more than mortal, I less than woman, I had never gainsaid thee. Not to enthrall, but to guide thy young judgment, hath been mine aim; thou shalt one day see this, perhaps. Meanwhile, if from the holy heavens they do behold what men do here on earth, I trust thy grandfather, Sir Ranulph, shall smile upon me, and judge me to have been not unfaithful to my trust.’

He turned away, and strode into the house. A few moments later Maurice was slowly walking across Bloreheath, with his horse’s bridle over one arm, and Lettice tearfully clinging to the other. They parted in dim twilight by the side of the babbling brook. He galloped away over the springy ground, and when the sound of his horse’s footfall had died away, she turned homewards, filled with dreamy

thoughts. The deep shadows of evening had quenched the sparkles on the stream, but with increasing stillness its murmur grew more audible, and, to her saddened ear, gave forth, as Rob had said, 'a tolling like unto passing-bells.'

END OF VOL. I.



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